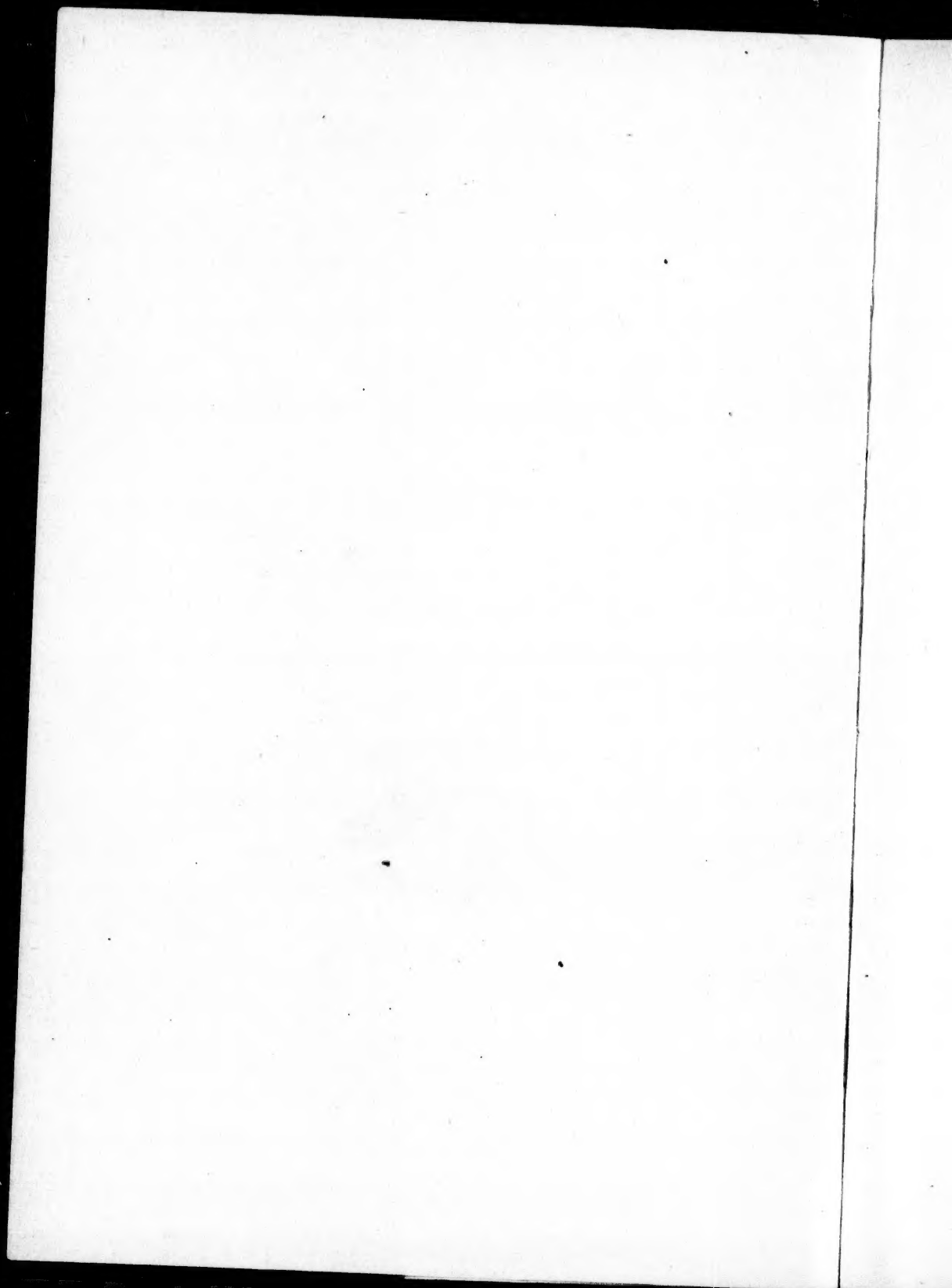




THE GIRL IN THE BROWN HABIT.

BY

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AUTHOR OF

"KILLED IN THE OPEN," "A REAL GOOD THING,"
"A GLORIOUS GALLOP," "STRAIGHT AS A DIE,"
ETC., ETC.



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THE GIRL IN THE BROWN HABIT.

CHAPTER I.

GOING TO THE SHIRES.

It was on the 1st of January, 188—, that Dicky Dawson and myself drove up the incline leading to St. Pancras Station, and gave our luggage in charge of an obliging porter, with strict instructions to see it properly labelled. Then, after laying in a large stock of sporting literature, we stepped into a first-class railway compartment, and tucking our rugs around us—for the day was cold, with a sharp touch of frost in the air—lit up our cigars, and proceeded to make ourselves generally comfortable.

Two lighter-hearted, happier, and more careless young men, I verily believe it would have been impossible to find in all Great Britain. There existed but one drawback to our present condition of intense satisfaction, and that was a certain want of ready money, far from uncommon amongst youthful officers in a crack cavalry regiment, whose tastes, habits, and general expenditure have the unfortunate knack of invariably being in advance of their finances.

To tell the honest truth, both Dicky and I were as poor as church mice.

Perhaps, on the whole, I might be reckoned a shade better off than my companion, since I was the eldest son of a baronet, whose position and family were of long-standing in the county of Gloucestershire; but my father—whose income was principally derived from land—had great difficulty in making both ends meet, and latterly, owing to the existing state of agricultural depression, he had been forced to cut down my allow-

ance to such an extent, that at times I debated in my own mind whether it would be possible for me to continue in the army.

As for young Dawson, being the Benjamin of a large family, he also had little save his profession to rely upon. Nay, I am wrong there, for Dicky cherished hopes, which it was impossible for me—even had I approved of them—to entertain. It may as well be stated at once, that he was an unusually good-looking young fellow, and in his more calculating moods, was wont to fall back upon the pleasing belief that, some fine day, he would indubitably find favour in the eyes of a wealthy heiress, with means sufficient to keep herself and him too.

So firm was this conviction, that Dicky and his matrimonial ventures had become a standing jest amongst the officers of the — Lancers, who professed to take the keenest interest in the various *affaires de cœur* of their inflammatory comrade. Unfortunately however for poor Dicky, one or two of his more unsuccessful attempts had reached the ears of his brother officers, who in consequence “chaffed” him in the most unmerciful manner.

But this badinage he accepted in perfect good humour, continuing to declare with imperturbable coolness that the happy event was only delayed, and that some day he should succeed in his endeavours.

“For, after all, you know,” he would add, laughing lightly meanwhile, “at four-and-twenty there is no need to be in such a desperate hurry. A fellow may as well have a bit of a fling first, till he spots the right figure, and is prepared to settle down as a Benedict. Mark my words, however, it will all come in good time.”

It was simply impossible to help smiling at Dicky’s confidence in his own powers of attraction. There was something so irresistibly naïve about it. And yet if ever a man were justified in thinking to win a wealthy wife through his personal charms alone, he was that man.

I, Miles Mannington, who am a great ugly fellow, yet not without an appreciative eye for beauty in other

people—perhaps because I possess so little myself—cannot refrain from admiration when I survey Dicky's smooth pink cheeks, his innocent-looking blue eyes, with their long soft curly lashes, and the pearly white teeth, which freely peep out from beneath that small fringe of down he caresses with such manly dignity. While I gaze at him a curious feeling creeps over me, that had the Fates brought me into the world as a young woman, instead of as six feet of masculine sinew and muscle, I must inevitably have fallen desperately in love with Dicky. In short, he is such a thoroughly *pretty* boy, that one is more than half inclined to pick a quarrel with Mother Nature for having, through some strange freak, made him a member of the sterner sex. He is a beautiful woman wasted.

And yet, there was nothing the least girlish about his disposition. If there had been any symptoms of effeminacy, I doubt whether he would have proved so universal a favourite with his brother officers. But he had all a true man's love of sport, and either at the covert side or in the hunting field could hold his own with the best of them.

Although I was his senior by two or three years, he and I had contracted a great friendship. Being by nature somewhat reserved and self-contained, the frank gaiety of Dicky's character had a powerful attraction for me. What mysterious magnetism made him return my liking I know not, since we were, at best, but an ill-assorted couple; nevertheless, two or three small services that on different occasions I had been able to render him, seemed quite to have secured his affections.

For some time past, the dream of our life, the height of our hopes and ambition, had been to spend our long leave in the Shires. To this end we had steadily economized. And now, the regiment was ordered to India in the Spring, and desperate at the thought of having but one more season's hunting for, perhaps, many and many a year to come, we had carefully husbanded our small resources and invested in a couple of

likely-looking screws a-piece. Alas! that we could not afford more.

Whinboro', a town well-known in the annals of the chase, was the spot where, after repeated consultations, we decided to pitch our tent. Harborough and Melton were too expensive to be thought of for a moment, and necessitated a much larger stud than the limited state of our finances could stand. But Whinboro' lay in the very centre of a fine hunting country, famous for good, strong, straight-running foxes, and although not quite so fashionable as the two afore-named towns, it held its own with either of them in the matter of sport. Anyhow, our choice once made, we never regretted it.

The horses had been sent down the day before, and now, as we were whirled along, past the tall telegraph poles and swaying wires, Dicky and I looked forward, with all the eager anticipation of youth, to a couple of months' keen physical enjoyment. What matter that there might, and probably *would be*, the Devil to pay later on? At the present moment, so disagreeable a contingency never entered our heads. *They* were filled with blissful visions of a very different nature. Huge double oxers, flying fences and acres of grass, traversed by undulating waves of ridge and furrow, danced before our eyes; whilst if any unpleasant thought did, for a second, obtrude, it was immediately chased away by the soothing recollection of that great sale we intended holding at the end of the season.

That sale which was to pay for everything. Forage, saddlery, shoeing bills, original outlay!

Not one single expense connected with the noble pastime of fox-hunting but what it was destined to cover. Horses that in the first instance had cost forty to fifty pounds a-piece would fetch, *at least*, a couple of hundred, when once their performances had been made known, thanks to the witching horsemanship and surpassing audacity of Mr. Dawson and Captain Mannington.

Who, in his youth, eagerness, and inexperience has not dreamed such dreams as these? Foolish they may

e, idiotic to a degree, but surpassingly sweet, possessing a fascination all their own; and when the time for dreaming them has past, and we grow old, and wise, and cold-blooded, how many are there of us who will not look back with a sigh of regret to the glowing days of our juvenile enthusiasm? Wisdom, experience, knowledge, where are they, compared with the joyous folly of youth?

As we began to near our destination, our curiosity increased; we craned our heads out of the windows and, struck by the beautiful prospect thus revealed, gave full vent to our admiration.

"What a jolly country to be sure!" I exclaimed ecstatically. "Nothing but grass in every direction. By Jove! there's hardly a ploughed field within sight."

"Ripping!" responded Dicky, laconically, but in tones of equal commendation. Then, after another prolonged gaze, he added: "I fancy though that it takes a bit of doing. Some of these fences are regular downright snorters, and, to make matters worse, I perceive that nearly all of them have ditches on *one* if not on both sides."

"So much the better. No doubt it is very necessary to put on the pace in these parts, but all the same I'm longing to have a shy at the man-traps, aren't you, old chap?"

"By Jingo! I should think I was," answered Dicky, with a keen sportsman-like look stealing into his blue eyes and making them flash. "Nevertheless, judging from first impressions, Miles, we may as well make up our minds to take a goodly number of falls, that is to say," with a slight sigh, "unless our cattle turn out considerably better than we imagine."

"Well!" said I, "we must hope for the best, and take consolation in the thought, that it is not always the highest-priced animals that prove the finest performers in the long run. Look at Velocipede, for instance, the winner of last year's Grand National. His owner picked him up out of a racing stable for five-and-thirty sovereigns, and he refused a couple of 'thou'

only last month. Barton told me so himself, so I know it for a fact."

"Other people have a happy knack of dropping into these good things," said Dicky somewhat ruefully, "but I can't say that my own experience has proved particularly fortunate. However, it is not likely, just at present, that I shall be able to afford to keep steeplechasers. I do wish though that I had bought that big brown horse by Laplander, instead of the bay mare. I'm afraid she's a trifle small, and it's asking a little 'un' a bit too much to carry close upon fourteen stone over a country like this. The galloping tells upon them, with the ridge and furrow. They have not got the stride."

And as he spoke, Dicky looked down with an air of disgust at his long, slim, well-proportioned limbs, as if at that moment he owed them a positive grudge.

"I shouldn't wonder if she carried you better than the brown for all that," returned I. "She's more compactly put together; and although I admit she does not stand very high, she is remarkably muscular. Besides, those long, low mares are often good 'uns' to go, and get over the ground in wonderful style."

"Anyhow, we will hope it may prove so in her case," said Dicky.

And then we relapsed into silence for a short time, and stared out of the windows more intently than ever. That flat green country, intersected with dark lines of flying fences, was in our eyes more attractive than the most beautiful scenery on earth. Presently we rushed past a very big bottom, with a bullfinch on the near side, and a good stout oxer to greet one on landing.

"H'm!" said I, somewhat doubtfully, "I suppose our 'gees' will jump all right, but when I see a place like this, it makes me feel that if we only knew something about their performances, we should set to work with a little more confidence."

"It won't take us very long to find out what they are good for," responded Dicky, resolutely; "and at any rate, old man, we'll both do our best."

"Naturally Nevertheless I admit to feeling a trifle nervous at making my *début* in the Shires, mounted on nags that are practically untried, and probably quite green to the work, whilst a lot of strangers look on and criticize. It makes a fellow long for a real good bit of stuff."

"Of course it does, but upon my word, Miles, the word 'nervous' sounds odd in your mouth."

"Why mine in particular? All people I believe entertain secret apprehensions, if only they were honest enough to admit them."

"Very likely; but you have been cutting out the work with the Aldershot drag-hounds, on any raw young horse lent you to ride, and in my humble opinion have displayed a disregard for life and limb that amounts almost to positive wickedness. The only excuse to be made for such recklessness is that you are not a married man."

"Come, shut up, Dicky, none of your chaff," said I, blushing like a school-girl.

"As for the 'lot of strangers,'" continued that young gentleman, rather rejoiced than otherwise at my confusion, "we shall soon make their acquaintance. Two fine young eligibles," laughing derisively, "like you and I, are sure to be in request. That reminds me, I forgot to tell you, Barrington gave me a letter of introduction just before I came away, to some old squire inhabiting these parts. He said he was a capital sportsman, and what's more to the point, exceedingly hospitably inclined towards the defenders of Her Majesty's Empire."

"Did Barrington mention his name by any chance?" I enquired.

"Yes. It was Austen, and moreover it appears the old gentleman has a very pretty niece. Barrington knows all about them. He stayed in the house once for over a fortnight, and said he was awfully well done Wines, dinner, cooking, quite first-rate."

"Aha!" I exclaimed jestingly. "So there's a pretty niece in the case, is there? Why then, Master Dicky,

the probabilities are that on the non-hunting days you will be perfectly happy, especially if the young lady has a nice little fortune of her own, invested in the Three per Cents. As she is living with her uncle, the inference is that she is an orphan, and will inherit his property. No doubt, as usual, Lieutenant Richard Dawson has only to appear on the scene of action, which being interpreted means the horizon of the fair one's girlish fancy, for it be a case of '*veni, vidi, vici.*'"

"Do be quiet, Miles!" said Dicky, colouring under the rim of his brown pot hat, but looking far from displeased at the suggestion. "Why should it be always me? The young lady might fall in love with you by way of a change, and leave me out in the cold altogether. Such a thing is far from unlikely."

"Not in your estimation, old chap, but exceedingly so in mine. I am not vain enough to imagine that any girl in her senses would take a fancy to such an ugly devil as myself. No, no Dicky," turning to my companion with a smile; "women like pretty things about them, and are very apt to judge a man from the outside alone. My unfortunate outside presents no attractive features, therefore it is only fitting and right that I should retire from any competition, and leave the field open to a young Adonis like yourself."

I spoke in jest, yet with an undercurrent of sadness, for there were times when, looking at my own features in the glass, I wondered if it could be possible for them to find favour in the eyes of any nice, genuine, true-hearted girl, such as, later on, if I married at all, I should desire to wed. As a child, my father had never been fond of me, on account of my ugliness, and without I hope being unduly concerned about my appearance, there were moments when the knowledge of its unattractiveness oppressed me, and rendered me painfully shy.

Dicky laughed at my concluding remark.

"Unluckily," said he, possibly recalling some of his past experiences, "the modern female knows uncom-

monly well how to take care of herself. There ought to be a young man's defence association, to protect us from the onslaughts of the fair sex, the portionless ones more than all. As for those with money, they are as a rule particularly wide-awake."

"And have they not a right to be so, when men talk as you are talking now, and when they are beset by innumerable dangers?"

"What dangers?"

"Danger number one, when those who by their physical strength, social advantages, and indulgence of the laws, think it no shame to give out publicly that they scoff at love, and cannot afford to marry unless they obtain so many thousands a year." And I looked him straight in the face.

Dicky reddened consciously. The dart struck home.

"Dash it all!" he exclaimed irritably. "What's a fellow to do? He wants such a lot of things now-a-days. Horses, hunting, shooting, racing, going about, choice cigars to smoke, good dinners to eat, a hundred and one little comforts—and how the dickens is he to get them, if he has no means of his own, except by marrying a woman with plenty of tin?"

"I don't know, Dicky. It is too important a question to go into at the present moment, but as you seem to have solved the difficulty so conclusively in your own mind, it is both useless and unnecessary to prolong the conversation."

A pause ensued of rather an awkward nature.

Much as I liked my companion, there was one subject on which he and I never wholly agreed. That subject was matrimony; his ideas and mine differing *in toto*.

At four-and-twenty, Dicky had, to my certain knowledge, already proposed to at least half-a-dozen girls, and whenever he came across a young lady with the reputation of being an heiress, he immediately laid himself out to pay her the most marked attention. Once, indeed, he had actually so far succeeded in his designs as to become engaged to the object of his machinations, for I cannot call them affections. But

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when the lady's father entered into settlements, &c., he sent the unhappy suitor to the right about, taking occasion to administer a stern rebuke as to his audacity.

• Dicky bore his dismissal with signal philosophy, but all these proceedings did not meet with my approval, and I was unable to tender much sympathy on the occasion. In fact, had it not been for his youth, one would have felt seriously disgusted by such conduct; but he seemed such a perfect boy, and so innocent of any really evil intention, that it was impossible to be angry with him for long. He had a way too of laughing off things, which frequently made it difficult to treat them with the gravity they deserved.

Nevertheless I was not wholly deceived, and I had long since learnt, that the sentiment of which Dicky was wont to discourse so prettily as Love, really deserved no better name than that of egotistical self-interest.

Possibly it was his misfortune rather than his fault that he had been a good deal spoilt in society, and petted by women a dozen years older than himself, well versed in the ways—and those the worst ways—of the world. From them he had gained a low opinion of the sex in general, calculated to do him much harm, whilst at the same time he believed himself irresistible with women. Amongst men he instinctively seemed to recognize his proper level, and therefore displayed the better side of his character. But I, as his most intimate friend, saw clearly, in spite of the affection I entertained for him, that a disposition like his, naturally easy-going, good-tempered, but essentially indolent, might under adverse conditions degenerate into becoming intolerably selfish. Therefore I took pains never wilfully, by word or deed, to countenance Dicky's heiress-hunting propensities. I considered that real good honest work would be the making of him, and luxury the absolute ruin; as it is of many naturally well-disposed young men, who simply have not the requisite force and energy to divest themselves of its continually increasing trammels.

And, above all, I never encouraged him in talking lightly of women. I disliked hearing their various points discussed, as if they were so many yearling fillies, to be knocked down to the highest bidder; and regarded as inferior creatures, merely brought into the world for man's individual gratification and amusement. To me it seemed that they had a higher and a diviner mission, and one that should appeal to our nobler, not our baser instincts.

Perhaps I was peculiar in my views, but then I happened to be one of those fortunate men who had had the great luck to possess a really good mother. A woman so pure, so loving and unselfish, that although she had now been dead many years, her memory was quite sufficient in itself to keep alive the respect I ever entertained for a sex unto which she once belonged.

For her dear sake, women were and always would be sacred in my eyes, and I revered them as something higher and better than myself.

Therefore, it jarred terribly upon my finer feelings to hear Dicky speak of them as he often did in a disparaging manner.

It is possible that at times they may have deserved his censure. I will not pretend to judge; only it seemed to me that we, as men, had no right to blame. We were so full of faults ourselves, and so often were the tempters. Some women there were, who, by the purity of their example, atoned for every one of their frailer sisters' errors.

I think Dicky guessed by my manner that I disliked the subject now under discussion, for when he spoke again he started quite a different theme. A quarter of an hour afterwards our train glided swiftly into the neat red-brick station of Whinboro', where we descended, and, gathering our luggage together, entered a one-horse omnibus, drawn by a broken-winded old hunter, which conveyed us to the "Horse and Hound" Hotel, at which hostelry we purposed taking up our abode for the next two months.

CHAPTER II.

A LEICESTERSHIRE STUD-GROOM.

WE were met on our arrival by a smiling, red-faced, round-waistcoated landlord, whose personal appearance yielded very direct testimony to the prosperous condition of the inhabitants of Whinboro'. This jolly-looking individual accorded us a most hearty welcome. Indeed, so profuse and genuine were his expressions of hospitality, that we immediately felt ourselves greatly prepossessed in his favour, as is the manner of weak humanity, whose vanity is flattered by being made much of by a comparative stranger, no matter in what station of life. Without analyzing the cause, such a reception raises a man in his own self-esteem.

"Glad to see you, gentlemen," exclaimed our host in a cheery voice, whose brisk tones rang out sharply on the still air. "Always glad to see any one as is fond of hunting and takes kindly to 'osses."

"Thank you," I said politely. "I presume, since you are evidently an enthusiast, that you follow the hounds yourself?"

"Used to, sir; used to; and many's the fine run I've witnessed in my time, but I'm sorry to say of late years I've been obliged to give up hunting. Getting a bit too stout, you see," and he gave a regretful glance at his ample dimensions. "But all the same," he continued, rubbing his hands together with a gesture that betrayed however weak the flesh might be, the spirit was still keen, "it's a grand sport. There's none grander going, and we does all we can to encourage it in these parts."

"Quite right, Mr. Dimblebee, quite right," rejoined Dicky, approvingly. "Your sentiments do you honour, and I only wish there were more people about of your way of thinking. We should not hear so much then

of fox-hunting being on its last legs; or of the farmers kicking up a row and objecting to their land being ridden over."

"Just so, sir; and I won't deny as how some of the farmers ain't altogether as pleasant as they might be, but if folks would only look at things a little more from their point of view, and study the question a bit, they would see there's a many excuses to be made for them."

"No doubt," assented Dicky, with all the pretended gravity of a great authority on the subject. "And in my opinion they are a right good lot of fellows. One can easily understand a man turning a trifle crusty, when he looks on and sees his best gate smashed to atoms, and his fences more or less ruined, particularly if he do not care for the noble sport himself."

"Aye, that's exactly where it is," returned Mr. Dimblebee with increasing animation. "And it's my belief that if gentlemen were a bit more considerate, there would be a deal less grumbling amongst the non-sporting division. Nobody as I knows on ever heard a real, honest, hunting farmer complain. As a rule the harder they rides, the less they seems to think o' their land, leastways in my humble experience."

And so saying Mr. Dimblebee stuck a fat red thumb in either waistcoat pocket, and spread out his eight chubby, creasy fingers on the capacious breadths that swelled in such a noble downward curve beneath them.

"Hear, hear!" said I; "I quite agree with all our host says, and there is no doubt about it, that we are most of us far too apt to forget we owe the greater portion of our sport to the farmers. Anyhow, without them, fox-hunting would not exist for a day, and therefore it is the bounden duty of every true sportsman to study their interests in every possible way. And now, Mr. Dimblebee," I continued, plunging into the subject that at that moment lay nearest my heart, "can you tell me anything about our horses? Did they arrive all right?"

"Yes, sir, I b'lieve so sir, but perhaps if you are in no particular hurry to go to your rooms, you would like to step out into the yard and see your stud-groom."

This suggestion met with our joint approval and was acted upon without further delay. A few seconds later, Dicky and I were deep in conversation with the gentleman—for it would be a positive insult to designate him by any other name—who had had the kindness and condescension to undertake the charge of our nags during the two months' stay we proposed making in the Shires.

It may as well be here stated, that Mr. Martingale was an unusually great man. No one gazing at him for the first time could have failed to have been impressed by the studied hauteur of his manner, the suavity of his smile and general mode of address. He gave one the idea of infinite superiority, and, judging from personal appearance alone, might have been anything from a peer of the realm, bursting with pride and blue blood, down to a fashionable jockey.

In order to account for the way in which two poor cavalry officers like ourselves became the employers of so great a man in his own particular profession, it may be desirable to offer a few words of explanation.

Mr. Martingale's services had been pressed upon us by a friend, a well-known sportsman, who during the winter months resided in the heart of Leicestershire, but who, at the very commencement of the season, had met with so serious an accident that he was forced to go abroad to re-establish his health, and had profited by the opportunity to dispose of his entire stud, of excellent, but somewhat aged, hunters. Happening to meet this friend by chance, one day in Bond Street, I informed him in course of conversation of my determination to spend my long leave at Whinboro' for the purposes of fox-hunting, whereupon he immediately volunteered the loan of Mr. Martingale.

"I'll tell you what it is, old man," he said authoritatively. "You must have a steady, responsible chap

at the head of your equine establishment. That's a *sine qua non*."

"But, my dear Cartwright," I responded with a forced and melancholy smile, "you forget that neither Dicky Dawson nor myself can muster between us sufficient funds to furnish an establishment suitable for so swell a groom as a man coming from your stable must necessarily be. It's rather a come-down, looking after half-a-dozen screws, when you have been accustomed to eighteen or twenty of the best hunters to be bought for money."

"Pooh! no matter. There's Martingale doing nothing at this moment but kicking his heels about in idleness, and getting into downright mischief for the want of work. Why, would you believe it, Miles? the beggar actually had the folly and the impertinence to come to me a short while back, and say he wanted to get married! Married, forsooth! (my friend was a bachelor) that shows he does not know what the deuce to be at next." And Cartwright positively snorted with disgust.

I laughed. His indignation was truly comical.

"And did you give your consent?" I enquired.

"No; catch me. I told him he was a fool of the first water, and after living with me for so many years, ought to know better than bother his head about women. I bid him stick to his horses, and leave the fair sex alone."

"Was not that a little hard, if the man's affections were engaged?"

"Ha, ha! That's capital." And my companion went off into a roar of laughter. "Martingale's affections, indeed! Upon my word, that's the best joke I've heard for a long time."

"Well, but there was no harm in his wanting to get married, was there?"

"No harm! There was great harm. There always is when a man is ready to make a fool of himself for the sake of a woman. Anyhow, I nipped the affair in the bud, and flatter myself I have saved poor Martin-

gale from life-long misery and subjection. To tell the truth, Miles, I'm fond of the fellow in my way, and don't want to lose him; for he's the best groom out, and always manages to bring the nags round in their turn. They are never sick or sorry under his care, but he's the sort of man that regularly goes to the dogs, unless he has a stable-full of horses to look after."

"In other words," said I, with a broad smile, "he goes a-courting against his master's wishes and advice."

"Exactly; you've hit the right nail on the head. I'm glad you understand me so well; for to my mind, between matrimony and ruin there's mighty little to choose. Directly a man saddles himself with a better-half, he loses all his freedom and independence, both of thought and action."

"Which accounts for your singular bluntness of speech, eh! Cartwright?"

"Come, shut up, Miles. And as for Martingale, the long and short of the whole matter is this. You and I are old friends, and it would be conferring a positive favour upon me if you would keep the beggar employed whilst I am away in foreign parts, sighing for the broad pastures of Leicestershire. Let Martingale look after your horses, and I will continue to pay his weekly wages."

This offer appeared, on reflection, too good to be refused; especially as I did not place implicit faith in the stable management of our soldier-servants. At least, I imagined that what was good enough for Alder-shot was far from being good enough for the aristocratic Shires. So, partly to suit my own convenience, and partly to save the infatuated Martingale from turning Benedict, I became his temporary employer, only bargaining with Cartwright that no blame should be laid at my door if the attractions of his innamorata proved stronger than those of horse-flesh.

Mr. Martingale now advanced to meet us, clad in a suit of neat, dark-checked tweed, which fitted him to such perfection, that I caught myself wondering who

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his tailor might be, and why the dickens Paddem on Conduit Street, whom I was in the habit of patronising, could not impart to *my* garments the same distinguished air of sporting refinement. Why could not *my* trousers be cut after that tight, horsey, and unwrinkled fashion, or did their faultless fit proceed entirely from the superior symmetry of Mr. Martingale's nether limbs? It was a problem to exercise a far more talented brain than mine.

On his head a black billy-cock was jauntily set, tilting slightly to one side, and as to his tie and pin, they were simply irreproachable.

A long yellow straw dangled from between Mr. Martingale's gently smiling lips, which occasionally closed upon it with a movement of caressing suction. A thin, aquiline nose, a pair of keen grey eyes, that flashed and sparkled beneath straight, dark, strongly-marked eyebrows, completed the portrait, and lent an aspect of shrewdness to the entire countenance.

"Well, Martingale," I enquired with the eagerness of a school-boy, "how are the horses? Are they all right?"

"A-o, Captin," he returned, in his slow, calm, well-modulated accents, "I am sorry to say they are very far from being '*all right*.' There's two on 'em coughing already."

Our faces lengthened perceptibly at this extremely disagreeable intelligence.

I wonder if there exists on this wide earth a horse who ever went a journey by rail—no matter how short—without contriving to catch cold on the way?

No sooner does an unfortunate man go to the expense of moving his hunters, than one of two things is sure to result. Either a long frost sets in, the very eve of his arrival in hunting quarters, or else every animal in the stable begins sneezing, and running at the eyes and nose.

It was foolish of us to expect to escape better than other people; since out of a limited stud of half-a-dozen horses, the odds are all in favour of at least three, if

not more of the number, proving practically useless for the first week or ten days.

"Hum!" I said dolefully, feeling much as if a bucket of cold water had been thrown over my spine. "That's bad news, Martingale; even worse than I anticipated. Have the nags fed pretty well since they came?"

"Some of 'em has, and some of 'em hasn't," was the laconic and not over-satisfactory reply.

"And which of them 'hasn't'?" I enquired, with a shade more tartness in my voice; for Martingale's cool, and to outward appearances unconcerned, manner produced a curiously irritating effect upon my excited nerves. It seemed to cast such a world of quiet ridicule on my ill-concealed anxiety.

Mr. Martingale gave a supercilious smile, thus further adding to the annoyance he had already been successful in producing. Then he very slowly and deliberately withdrew the straw from between his lips, and slightly shifting his respectfully attentive position to a more easy and natural one, said:

"That grey mare o' yourn ain't exactly the thing, Captin. She's a fidgety, worriting beast in the stable, and a bad crib-biter into the bargain."

"A crib-biter is she? Dear me! I had no idea of that, or else I should have thought twice about buying her. How very vexatious!"

This remark was received by a look of ineffable pity. Martingale was evidently arriving with rapid strides at the conclusion that the depths of my ignorance were fathomless.

"Them there screws seldom do turn out satisfactory," he returned coolly. "And for your sake, Captin, I heartily wish you had never set eyes on the mare. She's one of those as will cast discredit on a gentleman's stable, and will give me a deal of trouble with her food. However," exerting himself by a visible effort to speak in a more cheerful vein, "we must not be evil prophets; and it is just possible that she *may*"—and he laid a marked but dubious emphasis on the word—"do better than we think for. I've known many animals go bril-

liantly in the field, as are delicate feeders; but then --with a swift glance that seemed to look me up and down,—"they are only one day a week customers."

"Delicate feeder or not, she'll have to come out oftener than that, so long as she remains in my stable," said I curtly; for there was a nameless something about Martingale's way of speaking which to my mind savoured strongly of impertinence; and although we might be as poor as Job, I had no notion of putting up with any insolence from one in his subordinate position. Sooner or later he should be made to feel that I was, and meant to be, master.

"Yes, so I imagine," he returned, with what I deemed the same calm contempt. "However, I will see what I can do. I've been out this afternoon and bought some nice fresh carrots in the town, and I'll try my best to coax her ladyship with them to-night."

There spoke the true groom, and I felt my resentment immediately begin to subside.

"How about the brown and the chestnut? Are they on the sick list also?" I enquired with a feeling of positive despair; for when an ardent sportsman is as keen as mustard to make a start, and get to work, and at the same time owns but three horses in the world, it is a very serious thing for him to hear that one of them is out of sorts, and possesses a delicate constitution likely to unfit her for a long and tiring day's sport.

"The chestnut hit his off fore-leg, coming down in the train, Captin."

"The devil he did!"

"It was as big as a man's head the first thing this morning; but I've been a-fomenting of it well with warm water, and I think the swelling is beginning to go down."

"Humph! That means the best part of a week's rest, I suppose?"

"I'm afraid so, Captin. The hoss ought not to come out afore Friday next, at soonest, however well he goes on."

"Deuce take it all!" I exclaimed disconsolat

"There really seems no end to my misfortunes. It strikes me, then, that I shall be reduced to making my first appearance with the Whinboro' hounds on the old brown slow-coach. A remarkably lively prospect."

The animal referred to was my second charger; and I knew from long and bitter experience that he could not gallop much faster than one could kick one's hat along. Besides which, he had an alarming habit of suddenly indulging in unexpected genuflections, which to say the least of it, was highly disagreeable, and did not inspire his rider with any great degree of confidence.

Necessity knows no law; so I had brought him along, literally *faute de mieux*, but I shrank from the notion of his proving my first mount in the glorious Shires. I knew that under such circumstances it was impossible they should be glorious to me; but on the contrary, only a scene of despair and humiliation.

Even at Aldershot, when riding Obadiah, I had frequently been hopelessly distanced, and here it was a well-known thing that hounds were bred for speed, and were given to flashing over the big, flat fields, at racing pace.

For a few seconds I stood and inwardly cursed my poverty.

Oh! for five hundred pounds down, wherewith to buy two or three genuine good hunters. I felt that I had it in me to "go"—ay, and go well too—if only I possessed the proper cattle. I had been frequently complimented on my eye to hounds, and at seven-and-twenty my nerve had not yet begun to fail me. When I charged an obstacle I went at it without any deterring thought of a possible fall; but simply resolving by hook or by crook to get to the other side. If I only accomplished my purpose, I was not over-particular as to the manner in which it was done. A crash or two more or less counted as nothing; for I had not, thank goodness, arrived at the stage when the sound of a few crackling twigs causes a man's heart to leap up into his mouth.

But without decent horses, even the boldest riders

are non-plussed, and now, it seemed to me, the chances were I should not only make a fool of myself, but also bring disgrace on the respected name of Mannington—a name which, although it had not figured highly amongst statesmen and politicians, had invariably shone in all annals of the chase.

At that bitter moment, when I learnt my best horse was not fit to come out, I almost wished I had never been rash enough, with my slender means and beggarly stud, to come to Whinboro' at all; for when one let the eye travel over the vast expanse of smooth, undulating turf, which surrounded the little town on every side, the sight made a man there and then break the tenth commandment, and hanker sadly after that which he did not possess—namely, a stable full of good horses.

CHAPTER III.

INSPECTING THE STUD.

"COME, Miles," interrupted Dicky, a trifle impatiently, "it strikes me it's my turn to do a little questioning now, though I don't suppose I shall hear any better news than you have just done. Can you tell me," addressing Martingale, "in what state of preservation my extremely valuable stud is?"

Martingale slightly raised his eyebrows as he listened to this facetious demand, but otherwise remained perfectly unmoved.

"I am pleased," he said, "to be able to inform you, sir, that your horses are fairly well, with the exception of your last purchase, the little mare."

"And what might be the matter with her?" said Dicky, giving vent to an audible groan.

"She's running at the nose for all the world as if she was sickening for an attack of influenza."

So saying, Mr. Martingale, having at length disburdened himself of his entire budget of evil news,

took a large iron key from a hole in the wall where a brick had been displaced, and unlocking the stable-door, stood politely aside for us to enter, in order to verify, by personal inspection, the truth of his statements.

As already explained, our stud was an absurdly limited one, but the utmost economy had not enabled us to purchase more than two new horses a-piece. These and our second chargers comprised the entire stock with which we intended beginning the campaign.

No wonder then that the intelligence of nearly half this small force being temporarily disabled was regarded by both of us as a very serious calamity. In our confidence, and almost childish eagerness, we had never until the present moment made sufficient allowances for reasonable illness.

Buy them and ride their tails off, then sell them for what they will fetch, had been the one idea filling our heads.

Therefore Martingale's lugubrious account of the unlucky animals, which we had hitherto regarded with so much pride and interest, came as a shock of sobering severity. Our spirits ran down to zero, and we no longer saw everything connected with the noble sport of fox-hunting through delusive and rose-tinted orbs. The stable into which we now entered was large and well ventilated, and consisted of eight roomy loose boxes.

Alas! it went to my heart to see two of them standing perfectly empty, and there and then I registered an inward vow that if ever I came into money—which, however, seemed a highly remote contingency—the very first use I should make of it would be to invest in from half-a-dozen to a dozen real good hunters.

When we opened the door the grey mare so disparagingly spoken of by Martingale was lying down, but she struggled to her feet directly I cautiously peeped through the bars of her box, and forthwith gave one or two vicious snaps at an imaginary enemy in the air.

Meanwhile Martingale signed to a stable-lad to remove her clothing—he was too fine a gentleman to do so himself—and in another second the mare's slim, long body, with its greyhound-like proportions, was fully revealed to vision.

"She's nothing but a bag of skin and bone," observed Martingale discontentedly, for whatever good qualities a groom may possess, not one of the profession ever takes kindly to an animal known as a bad feeder. They *can* and *do* forgive many faults and deficiencies in their equine charges, but that most heinous one of all—a fanciful appetite that requires constant coaxing—is universally condemned. They have not a word to say in favour of a dainty "grubber," for, to use their own oft-employed phrase, "Such 'osses never does a man any credit."

To account, however, for the grey mare's undeniably emaciated appearance, it may not be out of place for me to give a short history of her antecedents.

Clean thoroughbred, by that fashionable sire Magician, out of Beautiful Maid, she had originally been destined for a racing career, but proved to be deficient in speed when tried in good company on the flat. Consequently, as a four-year-old, she made her *début* between the flags, running under the name of The Siren.

On this occasion she was said to have shown considerable temper, but to have fenced magnificently, until within a couple of fields from home, when apparently she got blown, and refusing to make an effort, crashed through a stiff stake and bound hedge, and falling heavily on the landing side, rolled completely over her unfortunate rider, who received such severe internal injuries as shortly caused his death.

Owing to the above untoward accident the mare fell into disfavour, and became a marked animal in her own particular neighbourhood.

Soon afterwards she was sold by public auction at a dead season of the year and fetched a mere song.

Just about a month before I came to Whinboro' I

was one day lamenting my want of cash to an old friend, and saying how more and more difficult I found it to buy any sort of suitable animal at the low price I could afford—viz., from five-and-thirty to forty pounds. He listened to me for some time in silence, then, after due consideration, said :

“I tell you what, old chap, if you don’t mind risking your neck upon an awkward customer, I really do believe I could put you in the way of buying a nag that would suit you, and might possibly turn out trumps.”

I assured him that my neck was altogether a minor consideration and of no consequence whatever.

“All right then,” he answered; “in that case, do you happen to remember a grey mare called ‘The Siren,’ who was the death of poor Bruiser Smith some two years ago? Well, I saw that identical mare in a hansom cab only a week since.”

“How do you know it was her?” I enquired, a trifle sceptically.

“Because she took me from my club to Victoria Station, and a real nasty one she was too in harness. I recognized her at once by a patch of dark hair she has on the left quarter. It is a very peculiar mark, and I should have known her out of a thousand. The only animal I ever remember seeing who had one exactly like it was the Duke of Westminster’s Bend Or. Anyhow, to make quite certain, I took a good look at her, and said to the driver as I stepped out on to the pavement: ‘Hulloa, my man! that’s a pretty smart one you’ve got there. Is she not called The Siren?’

“‘Yes, sir,’ he replied, ‘though she don’t go by that name now. I call her,’ giving the mare a contemptuous flick of the whip, ‘the “She-Devil,” and many a time have I regretted the day when I took it into my head to become her master.’

“‘Why,’ said I, ‘she’s a fine, strapping, well-bred animal, whose chief fault I should say consisted in being too good for your work.’

“‘I don’t know what you call “too good” for my work,’ he rejoined sulkily, ‘but if kicking my trap

to pieces times out of number is considered so, why then you're welcome to her, sir.'

"'She's a nice mare for all that, but her right place is not between the shafts. Some horses are like some people—unfortunate from the very beginning. They get kicked and buffeted about, and nobody ever finds out what's really in them.'

"'I've found out all I want to know,' growled he, 'and a precious lot more too.'

"'Why don't you sell her then, and get something a little better suited to harness purposes? You'll never convert a high-spirited creature like that into a good slave.'

"'Sell her!' said he, catching at the suggestion readily. 'Why, I'd sell her to-morrow if I could find anybody flat enough to buy such a tarnation brute.'

"'And down went the whip, this time with increased vigour, making the mare start forwards, trembling in every limb.'

"'That depends very much on the figure,' said I. 'What do you want for her?'

"'Thirty pounds. She cost me five-and-thirty, but I'd drop a little willingly to get out of a bad bargain.'

"'So now, Miles,' concluded my friend, 'if you are not afraid of a poor wretched dog with a bad name, there's your chance. The Siren has been knocked about a good bit, as a matter of course, and has one or two blemishes; but for all that, her legs are like iron, she is only seven this grass, and I really think a man in your position might do a great deal worse than to buy her. Anyhow, now you know the whole story.'

Although I did not consider his account altogether satisfactory from every point of view, still I was captivated by the mare's pedigree and the low price asked.

Beggars cannot afford to be choosers. I therefore sought out the owner, and after some slight haggling, ended by buying The Siren for the sum of eight-and-twenty sovereigns, determining to run all the risk of her turning out a vicious and absolutely worthless

brute. Disregarding her wicked eye and far too ready heels, I believed that, in spite of her being literally—as Martingale had stated—nothing but a bag of skin and bones, her breeding would tell, and when once we had become acquainted with each other's little peculiarities, she would carry me well to hounds. For there was a wiry look about her lean, tucked-up quarters, goose rump, and long, muscular thighs, which seemed to justify such a supposition.

Poor, she was—very; but just as hard as nails, and in my humble opinion more likely to go to the front in that condition—ay, and keep there too—than half the pampered, over-fed, over-fat hunters, constantly seen in the field.

Anyhow, when I looked at The Siren, then at the sleek, podgy old charger standing in the very next box, it did not take me long to determine, in my own mind, which of the two mounts I would select as a matter of choice.

As for Obadiah, I knew his merits and demerits by heart, and regret to say that the latter greatly predominated over the former; nevertheless I had brought him along, trusting that a truly merciful Providence would arrange for twisty foxes, open earths, and a catchy, indifferent scent, on the days I was forced to ride him to hounds. My last remaining horse—a chestnut—was also quite a recent purchase; and I knew even less about his performances than of The Siren's.

Happening to stroll into Tattersall's yard one bitter cold afternoon, the end of December, I made the welcome discovery that horses were literally being thrown away, and therefore determined to make a bid.

Golden-Drop was a strong, compact, useful-looking animal, displaying no particular quality, and I feared in but very indifferent condition; but he was well up to fourteen stone, and had good legs, shoulders and loins.

He struck me at the time as being a horse capable

of performing any amount of work; and, rightly or wrongly, I regarded him as the mainstay of my establishment.

It was therefore all the more provoking to hear of his having met with an accident in the train, which would require several days to recover from.

For a single glance at his enlarged and feverish fore-leg sufficed to show that Martingale had by no means exaggerated the injury, and that there was but little chance of Golden-Drop's taking the field before next Friday or Saturday. So I patted him on the neck, gave him a slice of carrot, which he munched with greedy approbation, and resigned myself to the inevitable, which being interpreted meant riding old Obadiah to the meet, finding him shut up hopelessly directly hounds found and went any pace, and returning home at an early hour sick at heart, thoroughly disgusted with myself and with him. For nothing takes the conceit out of a man so much, I mean of course one who has the wish to "go," as to be left altogether in the rear, and see the red coats disappearing one after one over the horizon.

Besides, this was not what I had looked forward to, and dreamed of almost every night of my life for the last six weeks; but there, our expectations are very seldom realized in this world. Something or other nearly always intervenes to rob the actual present of half its anticipated pleasure, and happiness is only a delusive name conferred upon minor disappointments in gratitude for escaping greater ones. I knew enough of the philosophy of life to have learnt that fact. Nevertheless facts are stubborn things, and hard to swallow. Here was I now, in the Shires, going out the very next day with the celebrated Whinboro' hounds, of whose doings I had read times out of number in the "Field" and "County Gentleman," and yet I could almost have gnashed my teeth with mortification at being obliged to put up with fat, wheezy old Obadiah. And so unjust, under such circumstances, are we inclined to be, that for the time being I completely

over-looked what few good qualities he possessed and thought only of the bad.

How he laboured in heavy ground, how he sobbed and panted when hounds ran fast, and how, although a fairly decent fencer when not too much bustled, he had soused me into a brook of cold, gurgling water the very last time it had been my misfortune to ride him.

These recollections were by no means encouraging. I determined to arm myself with a cutting whip, and wear a pair of spurs with extra long rowels. Having once decided these matters in my own mind, I felt easier, and by nine o'clock, after I had eaten an excellent dinner, consisting of Julienne soup, a fried sole, roast mutton and an apple tart, was even able to discourse on the morrow's prospects with tolerable equanimity.

Dicky was in a far more tranquil condition, since his best horse, an iron-grey gelding, by Lothario, was none the worse for the journey, and he therefore looked forward to making his first appearance with distinction, and "chaffed" me about what he termed my excessive vanity.

Is it vanity, I wonder, for a man, especially when he is an absolute stranger, to like to do his very best; or is it a justifiable, and, to a certain degree, commendable spirit of emulation, which has made England's sons what they are, and even in an enervated age like ours produces true heroes?

Anyhow, as I took one last look at the frosty stars before turning in, I resolved that on the all-eventful morrow I would do or die.

Obadiah was a sad sluggard.

Well, Obadiah should be woken up as he had never been woken up before. Poor old slavey! He had carried me after a fashion through a good many runs, but it was lucky for his peace of mind on this particular evening that he was unaware of the dire persuasion and vicious reminders that were destined to be expended the following day upon his fat and innocent sides.

Truly in his case might it have been said "Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise."

CHAPTER IV.

"BROWN HABIT."

THE next morning we were up betimes, and before long were deep in the difficulties of new leathers, tight boots, and refractory bows, which somehow or other seemed to require an immense amount of tying and untying before we finally got them quite to our satisfaction.

Non-sporting people are probably unaware of the almost ludicrous importance placed upon such trifling adjuncts of personal adornment by the gentlemen who frequent the chase; but, incredible as it may appear, I have known many a good fellow produce a bad impression on first acquaintance, simply because his breeches did not happen to be cut after the orthodox fashion prevalent amongst the members of a particular Hunt. Now-a-days, a button too much or too little, a tie suspected of being a dummy, or tops of an unfashionable hue, are quite sufficient to damn a man. For by such things is he judged.

Knowing this to be the case, Dicky and I took particular pains with our toilet, bestowing many little last finishing touches upon it. For we were well aware that the tiniest defect would be noticed, and probably severely commented upon, by our comrades in the field, and we determined that even the most critical eyes should find no fault with our "get up."

Fortunately, there was not any occasion to hurry, since we had not to make an early start, the meet being held at the fourth milestone on the high road leading from Whinboro' to Littlehampton, a town of considerable commercial and political importance.

We had only, as Mr. Dimblebee assured us, on questioning him regarding the route, "to follow our noses, and make no deviation either to the right or to

the left," so that any anxiety as to finding the way was completely set at rest.

Consequently, about twenty minutes past ten, our horses were led out from the stable, and we mounted them by the stone block in the yard—Martingale bestowing a parting rub with a chamois leather on their glossy quarters, by way of a farewell salute.

The day did not promise over well for sport; for, though bright overhead, with a pale, clear sky, it blew a perfect hurricane, whilst the roads were still white from the over-night frost and the cold was intense.

"Horrid bore, this wind," growled Dicky, making a sudden catch at his hat, which was blown clean off, and dangled by the guard-string, halfway down his back, thereby destroying the smoothness of its nap for the remainder of the day. "Deuced annoying," as he vainly endeavoured with his coat sleeve to restore its former gloss. "Hounds can't possibly run on such an infernal day."

"It don't look very rosy, certainly," said I, somewhat hypocritically; for inwardly, I was by no means displeased at the boisterousness of the elements, recognizing that the chances of Obadiah's defeat, and consequently my own, were considerably diminished thereby. "However," I went on, more cheerfully, not wishing to damp Dicky's spirits at the outset, simply because his mount was superior to mine, "there's never any telling. Scent is a thing that nobody knows much about, and, anyhow, the Shires are the Shires, and even half-a-dozen flying fences in succession will seem like Paradise to us, after the trappy banks round Aldershot, to which we have recently been accustomed. So let's hope for the best."

His hat and his equanimity being both re-established, Dicky was inclined to take a more sanguine view of things in general.

We were riding along at a foot's pace, having any amount of time; by-and-by, after we had cleared the outskirts of the town, we were passed by several second horsemen, jogging leisurely out to covert, and leading

riderless animals by their side, destined later on for the chase. After a bit, a couple of well-to-do farmers overtook us, carrying on an animated conversation as to last week's market prices. They were mounted on fat cobs, that, like their masters, seemed to know no stint in the matter of food. These were followed by a tall young man in a black coat, who gave one the impression of being a gentleman dealer, and by several men in pink, until at last, as we neared our destination, the scene grew quite animated, and we felt that subtle enthusiasm steal into our veins, which the very sight of anything connected with fox hunting is wont to inspire.

When we reached the meet we found hounds were just arriving, and forthwith fell into raptures over the level beauties, who certainly contrasted very favourably with the rough, ragged, uneven pack we had been in the habit of going out with lately. People now began to assemble from all sides; several carriages drove up, and an interchange of salutations took place amongst those present. As I knew nobody, and nobody spoke to me, I amused myself by watching the *habitués* of the Hunt, and making mental notes of various descriptions.

So engrossed was I in this occupation that I lost sight of Dicky, and was only made conscious of his presence by suddenly hearing a voice close behind me say, in an eager and unusually excited undertone:

"By Jove, Miles! look there. Isn't that an awfully pretty girl?"

I turned, and as a natural consequence of being thus addressed, stared in the wrong direction.

"Where, Dicky? I can see nobody but a fat old woman who looks several sizes too large for her habit, and has annihilated her saddle altogether. Is *that* your beauty, pray?" And I glanced at a stout, forbidding-looking female some ten or twelve yards distant.

"No, no, of course not. How stupid you are, Miles; just as if you did not know my taste better than to insult it in such a bare-faced manner,"

"Where is your divinity then?"

"Why, there; can't you see? straight in front, standing under that big tree, talking to an old gentleman with a red face and white whiskers. By Jingo! she's a regular ripper, and no mistake."

Amused by Dicky's enthusiasm I looked as directed, and not without reward, for I saw what I thought then and shall always think to the end of my days—one of the very prettiest sights possible for a man to see—a sight that is stereotyped through all time upon my brain.

I saw a slender young girl, whose round, fresh, rosy face wore an innocent yet withal somewhat sad expression, and whose large brown eyes were as clear and honest as the day. Her cheeks wore the bloom of health, her mouth was full and sweet, showing two rows of pearly white teeth, and her figure resembled a straight young sapling in its roundness and uprightness.

And yet, just at first, my admiration was more concentrated upon the horse than on the rider. Such a perfectly shaped animal is rarely met with, even in this country; and to tell the truth, at that period of my existence a beautiful horse was a far more pleasing object, and one that appealed more strongly to my senses than even a beautiful woman—I had a real passion for horse-flesh.

Now, the young lady to whom Dicky had directed my attention was mounted on a very dark chestnut roan, resembling in colour a famous two-year-old who had carried off all the principal prizes of the season. He was clean thoroughbred, with a small blood-like head set on a slender, shapely neck. His eye was bright, prominent, and full of fire; his ears small and mobile, his back and loins simply perfection, and his legs as clean as a yearling's.

He stood there, under the boughs of the dark old tree, arching his beautiful neck and sending the white foam-scuds flying with a backward toss of the head; whilst every now and again he raised one broad, firm

hoof, and pawed impatiently at the hard turf, as if eager to begin the day's amusement. The cold morning sun glinted fitfully down on his smooth coat, making it shine like satin. His full veins swelled with the generous blood flowing through them, and on his thighs and sloping shoulders the muscles stood out like wrought-iron.

To sum him up, he was the very beau-ideal of a thirteen-stone hunter; such a one as is met with but once in a lifetime, and to be prized accordingly. With covetous admiration I gazed on his fair proportions, just as a connoisseur gazes at some beautiful marble statue he fain would call his own.

"Isn't she an awfully pretty girl?" reiterated Dicky, with increased emphasis.

I gave a start. I had forgotten the young lady altogether.

"Oh! Ah, yes! I suppose so."

"You *suppose* so!" ejaculated Dicky indignantly. "What a fellow you are Miles, to be sure. Don't you *know*? I declare if you don't take care you'll grow into a regular misogynist."

"To tell you the truth, I was more engaged in admiring the horse than the lady. He's a beauty if you like. Just look at his quarters."

"Yes, but the rider comes first; at least, in my estimation." And Dicky cast a languishing glance in the direction of his admiration.

"Well," said I, "to satisfy you I'll examine the fair one more closely, and give an honest opinion as to her good looks. Not that we generally agree on such subjects."

I spoke coolly enough, yet as I gazed at the unconscious object of our conversation, I felt my heart quicken curiously.

Yes, she *was* a pretty girl, and no mistake. Trim, and smart, and natty, with her admirably-fitting brown habit, cut away in front to afford a peep of a little checked horsecloth waistcoat.

So pretty, and so *nice* as well, if you understand the

more comprehensive meaning of the word, that somehow I felt an immediate desire to make her acquaintance. For although there are lots of good-looking girls about, it is only now and again, at very rare intervals, you meet one who, at first sight, proves thoroughly sympathetic, and who makes you wish to see more of her. With the majority one laughs and talks, perhaps flirts, then parts; and parts without even a heartache, so transient is the impression made. But this girl gave me the feeling that if I came to know her, I might—well, I might fall head over ears in love with her.

"I must try and find out who she is," whispered Dicky, "and get introduced. A girl like that is sure to be good fun."

How he spoke of women! It made me quite angry to listen to him. Here was a sweet, fresh, honest young creature, and the highest estimate he could form of her was, that she would probably prove "*good fun*."

I choked down my wrath, and tried to make a civil reply.

"I wonder if she goes well to hounds," I said, by way of changing the conversation. "It would be a sin to waste such a horse on a roadster."

That question, however, was very soon answered.

In order to draw the nearest covert we had to strike across country, and a refractory gate refusing to allow itself to be opened or unhinged, it became necessary either to make a considerable *détour* or else to jump the fence close by. This fence was of a very fair height, with a rather nasty shelving ditch on the take off side.

When they saw it a large proportion of the Field immediately skedaddled, some declaring energetically that there was no possible object in jumping, and that you should never take an unnecessary leap, others attributing their disinclination to negotiate the obstacle entirely to feelings of humanity.

"The ground was very hard, you know. A horse's

legs were an awfully delicate piece of mechanism, and one should remember how frequently sudden jars brought on navicular and every kind of foot lameness, &c., &c."

The huntsman, not unnaturally, proved impervious to all such considerations, and popped over without the least hesitation, once he was satisfied that the gate could not be opened. His strong, well-made bay horse cleared the fence like a practised hunter, jumping not an inch more than was necessary, yet never touching a twig. He landed with a grunt and a merry whisk of his short bang tail.

I was close behind him, but instead of following at once, pulled up for a few seconds just to see the fun and watch how people managed these things in the Shires. My surprise was intense at the number of shirkers. Had I not seen it with my own eyes, I could not have believed so many "funsticks" existed in one field. We might not have so much outward show with our Aldershot draghounds, but certainly, as far as I could judge, the young fellows who came out with them rode many degrees harder than did these faultlessly appointed sportsmen. Of course, when I speak thus, I speak of the majority, not of the exceptional few, who cast a reflected glory upon every Hunt.

Whilst thus standing, speculating as usual, I heard a slight noise, and looking round, saw the young lady in the brown habit, setting her beautiful roan at the fence. The horse was not only very fresh, but also evidently a rather hot animal, requiring good hands. His rider, however, clearly thoroughly understood his impetuous and courageous nature. She would not allow him to rush, but with delicate skill restrained his too great ardour, until within a few yards of the fence. Then, she gave him his head, and he bounded over like a deer.

"Brown Habit," for, not knowing her name, so I mentally dubbed her, never moved an inch in her seat, but sat like one accustomed to jumping all her life.

Now men may say what they like against ladies

hunting, but to my mind there are few prettier sights than to see a perfectly mounted horsewoman, who really knows how to ride, going well with hounds.

Only, mark you, she must be thoroughly up in the business, and moreover ride, not as a groom or a horse-breaker, but as a lady.

Loose seats, flapping reins, dangling hair, upraised hands, noisy exclamations, break the charm immediately. Everything must be quiet and workmanlike, yet feminine.

And when, as in "Brown Habit's" case, one meets with the requisite combination, one cannot help wondering at, and admiring, the nerve, courage and skill with which, by a stroke of the neck, a gentle pressure of the heel, or low word of encouragement, the fair sex manage to control animals that often baffle the Lords of Creation.

Doubtless such women as these are capable of managing men just as well; but that idea does not occur to us when we see the pretty creatures, and even if it did—if we looked beneath the surface, and indulged in a little profitable introspection—who would not willingly be thus lightly and lovingly led?

Of course people's opinions vary on these subjects, but for my part I like a woman of character. The pretty inanimate doll does not appeal to me.

If a man marries, and has to spend all his life more or less in the company of one person, it is far better for him to link his lot with an intelligent and capable being, rather than with a poor meek housekeeper, who has no idea beyond the daily dinner. Husband and wife should act and re-act upon each other, developing the higher not the lower and more material part of their natures.

The girl in the brown habit was suggestive. She filled me with a vague longing for wife and home. I could picture her sitting by my fireside, talking to me in a sweet, bell-like voice, soothing to masculine nerves, and for the moment it made me feel strangely dissatisfied with my soldier's life.

CHAPTER V.

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT.

WHEN she landed in the opposite field, "Brown Habit" pulled the roan back into a walk, and with a smile on her pretty, pleasant face, looked round to see what brave Nimrod intended following her example.

Now I knew Obadiah could jump well enough if he chose, more particularly while he was fresh, and when I saw those two clear eyes fixed upon me for a second or so, as if their owner knew I was a stranger, and wanted to see how I could perform, a mad desire seized me to get over that fence in good style. It was not because I was afraid that I had hesitated so long, but simply to satisfy my curiosity. Consequently I shortened my reins, in a vigorous grasp, and drove Obadiah at the obstacle with the greatest possible resolution.

Oh! the brute! The *cunning*, WICKED, DISAPPOINTING old brute!!!

He pricked his big lop ears, and seemed all over like jumping, but just in the last stride, as he looked down into the black depths of the ditch at his feet, his coward heart failed him, and stopping dead short, he tried his very best to cut it. But he had reckoned without his host.

Once, twice, thrice, each time with angrier and more vehement persuasion, did my long rowelled spurs punish his sides, whilst again and again with merciless severity the cutting whip came down upon his round old quarters.

He changed his feet, hesitated, then finally gave an enormous buck-jump into the air. I have been told before now that I can ride—that an awkward horse will go better with me than with most people, but truth compels me to state that on this occasion, when we

landed on the other side of the fence, I was clasping Obadiah round the neck, in a friendly and endearing fashion, which was far—very far—from expressing my true sentiments towards that venerable animal.

With a muttered execration at the old beast's waywardness, I struggled back into the saddle, just in time to see "Brown Habit" turn her head away, in order to try and conceal the broad smile overspreading her features.

A quite unreasonable anger took possession of me at this sight, and I swore a solemn oath that the day should not pass by without my wreaking vengeance on Obadiah and retrieving my position in the young lady's eyes.

Honestly speaking, I do not believe myself to be extra vain; but in the whole of this wide earth I know nothing more humiliating and disconcerting to a man's self-conceit than to be laughed at by a pretty girl. The prettier the girl, indeed, the worse the injury.

Now, at that moment, I was in the irritating position of being absolutely certain I had occasioned "Brown Habit" considerable amusement. No doubt, a real, good, worthy, unselfish fellow ought to feel gratified at contributing to the innocent enjoyment of a human being; but then there are very few good, worthy, unselfish fellows about, and they don't appreciate a joke at their own expense. Leastways, such was my experience.

Not one person in a hundred can so efface the uneasy inner consciousness, which perpetually comes clamouring to the surface, as to be impervious to the stings of ridicule. As a rule, the smallest suspicion is enough to wound a man in his tenderest place.

However, we were now approaching the covert, so that my thoughts were shortly diverted from the exceedingly unsuccessful negotiation of my first flying fence.

Hounds were put in, and soon began to scatter and pick their way through the thick undergrowth of the wood. A few minutes' silence—then came a slight

whimper, followed by a joyous proclamation that Pug was at home.

But the wood was large, and Reynard seemingly loth to quit its friendly shelter and face the high wind outside. So by degrees the glad notes died away to a fitful whine, and nearly twenty minutes elapsed before hounds again recovered the scent and gave tongue.

Meantime, the day did not improve, becoming more and more boisterous and inclement. Horses' coats were staring, and their bodies trembling, from the cold, suspense, and excitement combined. Obadiah, as if matters were not already bad enough, began a series of convulsive kicks, of a very unpleasant and unseating nature. He was never very partial to standing about at covert side, so, wishing to quiet him down a bit, I looked around in the hopes of spying a snug corner, sheltered from the icy wind, and was fortunate, by opening a bridle-gate, slightly removed from the crowd, to find one a little way inside the wood. I congratulated myself on the move, for it was many degrees warmer under the trees; and my hands and feet had already lost nearly all sensation. I had not stood there many minutes, however, before I heard footsteps approaching, and presently a cheery bass said:

"Nell, are you not almost frozen to death?"

"Very nearly, uncle," came the reply. "We want a gallop badly, to put a little warmth into man and beast. But I'm afraid hounds won't do much to-day. They never can face such a wind, and it's been blowing hard all night."

I looked up, and saw the young lady I so much admired, accompanied by the same rosy-faced, white-whiskered old gentleman to whom she had been talking at the meet.

Now, I believe a voice to be a wonderful index of character. It tells a great many tales; and this girl's voice was like herself—charming.

It possessed no gruff, guttural notes, or shrill intonations, such as are common to so many of the sex; but

it was sweet and smooth, and clear as a bell. Having once listened to its melodious utterances, I longed to hear them again.

The couple took up a position quite close to my own, so close, indeed, that I could not help noticing how soft and sad her face was in repose; and how, whenever she was not speaking, a dreamy expression stole into the large hazel eyes, that, somehow, made my heart grow big. To me, she looked like one who, despite her extreme youth, had known some bitter sorrow, which warred with the natural frank gaiety of her nature. And, thus thinking, she became more than ever an object of interest in my eyes. The majority of people never seem to me to dive beneath the surface; they take their fellow-creatures as they find them, and judge them by outward appearances alone. They do not think of the busy, inner life, the seething mass of thought, and doubt and hope, which forms quite a world apart. I always feel as if I *must* probe into it, and compare the experience of other folks with my own. This girl had a history. I longed to know it, not from motives of curiosity, but so as to understand her nature better.

I do not think her good looks alone inspired me with this desire and sympathetic interest, for if one took her to pieces she was by no means strictly beautiful; but there was something so fresh, so natural, and attractive about her whole appearance, that one quite forgot whether her features were classical or not. At least this was how she affected me, and I believe very strongly in first impressions.

"Nell," said the old gentleman, speaking again in tones of tender authority, for it was clear she was the apple of his eye, "I won't have you riding so hard as you have been doing lately. Do you hear me, child?"

"Yes, uncle."

"You'll be coming to desperate grief if you go flying over all these great big dangerous fences. I cannot bear it, Nell. It makes me tremble for your safety."

"I'll try and be careful," she said softly, "only when

hounds run hard the temptation to follow is so enormous."

"Well, there won't be much temptation to-day, I take it. When they break covert, stick to me, Nell, for the going is far from good, and you might meet with an accident."

She laughed, a little silvery laugh. It betrayed that in some things she had a will of her own.

"You forget, uncle, that it is not always so easy in a crowd to keep with one particular person. You men," and she gave a dainty shrug of her shapely shoulders, "are all so horribly alike. It's as much as one can do to tell one from the other."

"That's flattering to our individuality, Nell."

"Well, you have all red coats, and white leathers and tall hats, and most of you broad backs. You really require some distinguishing mark, by which you can be recognized. Then, perhaps, when hounds run, I should not have so much difficulty in finding you."

"Ah! you puss!" said he, with an indulgent smile. "That's your way of getting out of it. Pretending you don't know your own uncle, indeed!"

"I should know you anywhere," she rejoined with charming feminine inconsistency.

"The real fact of the matter is, you disdain my steady riding, and like most young people must always be careering at the very tail of the hounds."

"I prefer to be there certainly," said Nell demurely. "That is if I can."

"Well, well, child, it's no good arguing with you. 'A wilful woman maun have her way,' in this, as in every other thing. But Nell, darling, do be a bit careful, for really and truly the frost has made the ground very slippery in parts."

She smiled up into his face, and I could tell what a close affection subsisted between them.

"Very well," she said. "I'll try to remember, only you would not like to see me be a disgrace to Sweetheart." And she leant forward, and patted the roan's dark beautiful neck, whilst the horse, knowing the

sound of her voice, turned round his intelligent head and rubbed it affectionately against her habit-skirt.

I was so taken up with watching her every movement, that I was quite startled when a loud "Gone for'ard aw-a-ay" proclaimed the welcome fact that at last Reynard had taken to his heels.

Immediately we scurried back through the bridle-gate by which we had entered the wood, I holding it open for Nell to pass through. She rewarded me by a little gracious inclination of the head, and a sweetly uttered "Thank you." Then I made haste to follow, and as good luck would have it found the fox had broken covert close by, and the hounds were already streaming away in his wake.

I clapped spurs into Obadiah, and for a few yards Nell and I rode almost abreast, but the chestnut-roan's superior speed soon told, and he quickly forged ahead. Nevertheless I kept my eyes steadily fixed on his rider's slender figure, as it rose and fell over the ridge and furrow. What had come to me I did not know, for I was actually thinking more of a woman than of the hunting. Such a thing had never happened in my life before, and it occasioned me considerable uneasiness. I wondered if I was losing my nerve, growing old, getting less keen, or—I blushed at the very thought—falling in love at first sight. One had read of such a thing, although, until now, I had never actually believed in it.

But the fun was increasing. A fence loomed ahead. Nell flew it like a bird. I followed at a respectful distance, which, alas! grew steadily greater. Another and another fence! My blood became heated. I began to warm to the work, and fixed my eyes no longer on that graceful female figure riding so well and boldly, but on the leading hounds. It behoved me with Obadiah to watch their movements narrowly. We had not galloped six fields, and already I felt he could not go the pace. Unless I took advantage of every turn, soon, very soon, I should be left in the rear.

Fortunately the weather told in my favour. No

hounds could run far in such a wind. Before another five minutes were over, up went their noses, and they came to a sudden halt. They had got away so close to their fox, that it was clear there could not be an atom of scent. The huntsman let them try to puzzle it out, but after a bit, finding they could make nothing of it, he made a forward cast, and to the general surprise, hit off the line.

A very unnegotiable-looking fence now presented itself to our vision. A thick, impenetrable bullfinch, some six feet high, with a huge ash rail on the near side, barred our onward way. The only available spot was where a gap occurred in the fence, but a stiff flight of rails of unusual height had been recently fixed, to make good the deficiency.

These rails were of such an exceedingly uncompromising nature, that even the huntsman pulled up his horse, and took a hasty glance right and left, to see if no other mode of egress could be found.

Now Obadiah had one merit. He was a fine timber-jumper, and the short gallop had done him good, and put him on his mettle. Just for the moment, too, the hounds looked as if they might run, and under such circumstances I was never accustomed to wait long.

Therefore, I crammed my hat on my head, and rode at the rails, determining to get to the other side *somehow*. I should have been ashamed to own even to myself, that the close proximity of Nell goaded me on to feats of valour, and made me hail with joy an opportunity of vindicating my horsemanship.

The old horse cantered leisurely up to the timber, broke into a trot in the last few strides, surveyed the obstacle inquisitively during one awful moment, which made my heart go into my mouth, then gathered himself together, sprang into the air, gave a tremendous twist to his hind quarters, struck the top rail hard, but to my intense relief landed safely on the other side, with nothing more than a pretty considerable peck.

The huntsman immediately followed, and got over by the skin of his teeth.

Then, to my horror, I saw Nell take her horse by the head, and go at the rails. I made so absolutely certain that the result would be a bad fall, as her uncle had predicted, that I pulled up in order, in case of emergency, to be able to offer the necessary assistance. I recalled all my praise of ladies in the hunting-field, and remembered only the danger. How their soft flesh might be bruised, their delicate limbs broken, and their pretty faces disfigured for life.

But had I known the full excellence of Sweetheart I need have entertained no apprehensions. Such a fencer I had never seen in all my days!

He took off a yard before he came to the timber, and I almost shut my eyes with a sick feeling stealing over me, as I said to myself, "now for a crash," but he never even touched it. He cleared the topmost rail with ridiculous ease, and landed far into the opposite field, as if neither height nor width offered any difficulties to him. I could not refrain from an exclamation of admiration.

Nell heard it and smiled. She knew the horse had done well—ay, and herself too.

"Oh, you beauty!" she said in tones of loving pride, as she galloped by. Needless to say, the remark was addressed to Sweetheart, not me.

But after all, it appeared that we had risked our necks unnecessarily. Hounds could make nothing whatever of the scent, and a long delay ensued, during which we bided—or perhaps it would be more correct to say rash—people found a gate, and joined the rest of the Field, who doubtless looked down on the unnecessary ardour we had exhibited. So time passed away and the sport continued of a poor description.

Nevertheless Dicky and I thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. To begin with, the country was new to us, and we were unused to the delightful sensation of riding over grass; and secondly, although we saw nothing approaching to a decent run, we had plenty of jumping, which for the present amply satisfied our aspirations.

We realized that we were feeling our way, and on the whole—taking our indifferent cattle into consideration—preferred doing so cautiously, rather than being precipitated without due preparation into all the glories of a clinking forty minutes in the celebrated Shires.

If I were to speak the honest truth I should confess, as I rode home, to being very well satisfied with the day; for quite apart from anything to do with the sport, I entertained a pleasing conviction that I had retrieved my position in Nell's eyes.

Why I should think of that young person at all, or care for her good opinion, was a problem, however, that puzzled me not a little. Neither could I account for the feeling of irritation which took possession of me as I listened to Dicky's glowing praises of the young lady.

He really said nothing with which in my heart of hearts I did not wholly agree, and yet it annoyed me, knowing him as I did, to hear his profuse eulogy.

All of which proves that I was in a very unreasonable frame of mind.

"Deuced pretty girl," reiterated Dicky, for about the hundredth time. "Just about as pretty a girl as ever I set eyes on."

"Exactly," I said sarcastically. "And if only she has money, no doubt you will go in for her, after your usual style, eh?"

Dicky's blue eyes opened wide, and looked me innocently in the face.

"Well, upon my word," he said coolly, "I believe I might do worse; but I'll find out first from Mr. Dimplebee who she is, and what her prospects are; it's as well to have these things cut and dried before making a start."

"She's sure to take you, of course? She'll jump at the chance no doubt?" satirically.

"More improbable things have happened before now," answered Dicky in all good faith.

"Tut!" I responded, venting my ill-humour on Obadiah's side. "You're a regular man of business you

are. It's a pity to see such a cool, calculating head thrown away."

"I don't intend that it should be thrown away, old boy. I'm only waiting an opportunity."

"Very well," said I, now thoroughly roused. "You think that girl will have you if you ask her, and I tell you she won't."

"Why not?" enquired Dicky, with mild astonishment.

"Because, although I know nothing whatever about her, and she's as complete a stranger to me as to you, I tell you she's a thousand times too good for Lieutenant Richard Dawson, who would propose to any young woman with sufficient money. There now."

And I looked him fiercely in the face, almost wishing to provoke a quarrel.

Dicky drew himself up in his saddle. He was hugely offended, for I question much whether he considered any girl *could* be too good for *him*.

"What rot you're talking, Miles," he said irritably. "I don't know what the devil's the matter with you this afternoon, but you are most deuced uncivil. Anyhow," and an ugly look crossed his handsome face, "after your very kind and flattering remarks, I shall make a *point*," emphasizing the word, "of paying the most marked attentions to Miss Brown Habit."

I bit off the end of my cigar in disgust.

During all the years I had known Dicky, I had never come so near hating him as at that moment.

CHAPTER VI.

MR. DIMBLEBEE GROWS GARRULOUS.

THAT same evening, after we had done full justice to an excellent repast, we determined to inaugurate our first day's hunting in the Shires by calling for a bottle of our host's old port, a wine he had specially recom-

mended to our attention as being something very out-of-the-way good.

Mr. Dimblebee, when the order was delivered, appeared in person with the precious liquid, which he placed upon the polished mahogany table, eyeing it meanwhile with a tender pride.

"There, gentlemen," he said, "a man oughtn't to praise his own goods, but though I says it as shouldn't, a finer wine nor that is not to be easily found."

Dicky forthwith proceeded to pour himself out a glass, then raising it to the light he allowed a few drops to gently rest upon his palate, after the orthodox fashion in vogue amongst critics, who at any rate pretend to great knowledge.

"First rate," he said at length, with an approving smack of the nether lip, "quite first rate. I don't know when I have tasted a wine so full of bouquet. But come, Mr. Dimblebee," he continued, smiling hospitably at that gentleman, "if you are not in a hurry, pray sit down and help Captain Mannington and myself to buzz the bottle."

I did not second this invitation, wondering, indeed, why Dicky gave it; but my ignorance was soon destined to be enlightened. He generally had some ulterior purpose in view, and had I been half sharp I might have guessed what it was. Mr. Dimblebee, however, was nothing loth, and evidently did not require much pressing.

"You are very good, sir," he responded with alacrity, "and since you are so kind, I'll just take one glass in order to drink to your continued health."

So saying, he seated himself upon the edge of the nearest chair, where he remained poised with manifest discomfort.

But Dicky was conversationally inclined, and took no notice of the physical uneasiness inflicted by a sharp-rimmed cane chair on a soft stout body.

"Got plenty of that stuff in your cellar, Mr. Dimblebee?" he enquired blandly.

"Plenty, sir, I'm glad to say. I bought thirty dozen of it at the sale which took place last year of all poor Mr. Stainforth's effects."

"Really? And why did Mr. Stainforth part with such wine as this?"

"Necessity, Mr. Dawson, necessity. He was very extravagant, and ran through his entire fortune in something under three years."

"Ah! that was rather quick work. Rather quicker than usual. The Jews will generally help one along the road to ruin at a somewhat slower rate."

"Just so," said Mr. Dimblebee, with a quiet chuckle. "But Mr. Stainforth, he was an uncommon free, nice young gentleman, and went the pace tremendously."

"The poor devil had to sell up, I suppose? The old, old story. Good fellow, large heart, hand always in pocket, no end of a smash, eh?"

"Exactly," returned Mr. Dimblebee, looking at Dicky not without a certain amount of admiration. "I see you know all about it, sir."

"In a very small way—only in a very small way," said he apologetically. "But how about this wine? I'm interested to hear how it came into your possession."

"Why, sir, Mr. Stainforth at last was forced to part with pretty well everything he had in the world in order to satisfy his creditors' demands. And so, when he sold, I bought all I could lay hands on—all, that is to say, of his famous old port. One don't pick up such wine as this without some unusual opportunity presenting of itself."

"No, it's not to be got in the market," assented Dicky, taking another sip. "And now, Mr. Dimblebee," he continued confidentially, "I want you to tell me something about the people we met out hunting to-day. There is one young lady in particular who has excited not only my admiration, but, what goes for a great deal more, also that of my friend."

And Dicky cast a sly glance at me, which I received with an impenetrable front.

"Indeed, sir," said Dimblebee seriously, "I shall be very happy to give you every information in my power."

"Be quiet, Dicky," I interrupted, beginning to see which way the land lay, "and don't display your natural inquisitiveness in our host's presence."

But that diplomatic young gentleman was not to be so silenced. He had invited the worthy and unsuspecting Dimblebee into our sitting-room for the express purpose of "drawing" him on the subject at present exercising his (Dicky's) mind, and he was not to be diverted from his intention by any mild remonstrances on my part. On the contrary, I believe they only goaded him on to fresh enquiries.

"I tried to find out who she was," proceeded Dicky, quite serenely, "but nobody would take compassion on a poor stranger out in the hunting-field and relieve his curiosity. By the way, it strikes me, Mr. Dimblebee, that your good people here are not over and above sociable; at least, I did not find them so to-day."

"Well, you see, Mr. Dawson, they requires a little knowing. They don't jump at a person at the first go-off, so to speak."

"No, that they certainly don't; I can answer for that," responded Dicky, a trifle irately, for, as before stated, he was accustomed to be well received, especially by the fair sex. "However, I've no doubt you can tell me what I wish to know."

Mr. Dimblebee blinked his eyes and looked flattered by the assumption.

"I'll try, sir," he murmured benevolently.

"Well," said Dicky, "I want to find out who a certain young lady is, who rides a beautiful dark chestnut-roan horse. She goes like a bird, and is chaperoned by a nice-looking old gentleman who can't keep up with her, try what he will."

"Ah!" exclaimed Mr. Dimblebee, with a smile of mingled pride and satisfaction overspreading all his features. "I don't wonder you want to know who *she* is. Why, that's Miss Nell."

"Oh! Miss Nell, is it? And who pray might she be?"

"Miss Fitzgerald, I mean; Mr. Austen's niece. But she has grown up among us from her childhood, and somehow we have all got into the way of calling her Miss Nell, just as if she belonged to us like."

"Phew!" exclaimed Dicky, giving a long, low, comprehensive whistle. "So she's Mr. Austen's niece, is she? Why, Miles," turning to me, "that's the name of the old gentleman to whom Barrington gave us a letter of introduction."

"Really!" I observed coolly, for I felt little or no surprise at the intelligence, having indeed partially guessed it some hours previously.

"Miss Fitzgerald is an uncommonly pretty girl, Mr. Dimblebee," quoth Dicky, in accents of strong approval.

"She is that," returned he, evidently well pleased at hearing the young lady praised. "And moreover, she is just as good as she is pretty, which is saying a great deal as times go. I do not believe there is a creature for miles around who does not know and love Miss Nell, bless her dear heart! Why, the very sight of her pretty face is enough to do a man good."

Dimblebee's sincere admiration for Miss Fitzgerald pleased me greatly, for it seemed to confirm my own first impressions, and to justify the sensations she had called forth in one not usually so easily stirred by womankind.

"She knows how to ride at any rate," I observed, with all the carelessness at my command. "It did not take me two minutes to find that out."

"Ride!" exclaimed our host, warming into sudden enthusiasm. "I should think she could. There's not another lady in these parts as can touch her across a country. She beats 'em all, out and out."

"I don't suppose, however, that there are many other ladies so well mounted."

"Perhaps not, Captain Mannington. The roan's a real beauty, and I won't deny but what there's a deal in the animal, but, still, not all. You start Miss Nell

and any other woman, fair and square on the same terms, and I'll back her to get the best of it."

"Does Miss Fitzgerald always live with her uncle?" enquired Dicky, now boldly leading up to those probing questions, which, for some little time past, I had both anticipated and dreaded.

"Yes, sir, mostly," answered Mr. Dimblebee. "Her father and mother have been dead some years, and left her a very fine fortune, I believe; leastways, so people say."

Dicky's countenance assumed a highly animated appearance.

"Oh, indeed!" he exclaimed. "Have you any idea of the amount?"

"I don't exactly know, sir; but I've heard tell as how it was not far off three or four thousand a year."

"Pretty good, that, for a single young lady. I suppose, at her uncle's death, she will inherit the greater part of his property?"

How these horrible, interested questions of Dicky's jarred upon my sense of what was gentlemanly. I longed to put a stop to the conversation, or else ram my fingers into my ears. I could do neither. But I vowed to pay Dicky off, some day.

"Yes, sir, I believe so," replied Mr. Dimblebee. "Report has it that Miss Fitzgerald will be one of the richest heiresses in the country, when Mr. Austen dies. He owns a great deal of land in these parts."

"He's not an old man, though, not over sixty-five, I should say," observed Dicky, reflectively.

"Sixty-three next June," put in Dimblebee.

"Ah! exactly. And he might marry," suggested Dicky, with an odious, calculating prevision as to possible contingencies.

"No, sir, I think not," said Dimblebee, firmly. "Mr. Austen's very unfortunately situated at the present moment."

"How so, poor old chap?"

"Why, you see, sir, he has a wife already."

"Ah! that's against it certainly. But in this case,

surely he will leave his money, or the greater part of it, to the widow?"

"People say not, sir. You see, Mrs. Austen has been out of her mind for many years past, and is obliged to be shut up in a mad-house. They had an only child, a boy, and he was killed by an accident, and she lost her reason in consequence."

"Poor thing! That was very sad," said I.

"Yes, Captain Mannington, it was; and Mrs. Austen, she never recovered from the shock. She had gone to the station to meet her boy coming home for his holidays, and then the news came that there had been a terrible smash on the line, and he was amongst the killed. She never saw him alive again, only the dead, mangled body; and she fainted clean away, there and then, and has had to be kept under supervision ever since. They say that, even now, her screams are something piteous; and it takes two men to hold her down, when the fit comes on, and she fancies her boy is in danger. Poor lady!"

And Mr. Dimblebee brushed his hand hastily across his honest old eyes, and I liked him all the better for the action, since it showed that he possessed a kind and feeling heart.

"Mrs. Austen does not live with her husband, then?" asked Dicky.

"No, he goes to see her, every now and again; but she is obliged to be kept shut up; consequently, when Mr. Fitzgerald died some fifteen years ago, Miss Nell came to stay with Mr. Austen, and now she is like a second child to him. Indeed, I question if he could be much fonder of her, even if she were really his own."

"And what will the old fellow do, supposing Miss Nell gets married?" remarked Dicky, with an odd sort of self-satisfied smile curling the corners of his handsome mouth; and I felt, when I saw it, as if I could have punched his head.

"Ah! there was some talk of that, about two years ago," replied Mr. Dimblebee, who, under the influence

of another glass of the old port, was growing exceedingly loquacious and communicative.

"Well, and what happened?" said Dicky eagerly,

"Nothing, sir. It came to nothing," answered Dimblebee, with a mysterious shake of the head, which seemed to say, he knew a great deal, if only he chose to tell it.

"Nothing! How was that? Did the parties quarrel about settlements?"

"Well, to tell the truth, sir, they kept the matter very close; and as it was Mr. Austen's wish that the affair should not be talked about, it is not for me to do so now. But, I may say as how the gentleman behaved like a blackguard, and every one was very sorry for Miss Nell. It well-nigh broke her heart."

"Pooh!" exclaimed Dicky, sceptically. "Pretty girls and broken hearts have nothing whatever to do in common. There are always plenty of people about, ready and willing to repair the damaged article." And he twirled the short ends of his fair moustache caressingly, as much as to say, here was an Adonis, at any rate, equal to the occasion of consoling sweet, love-afflicted damsels.

I could endure this conversation no longer. It was intensely distasteful to me, and I felt my temper momentarily rising.

"Come, Dicky," I said peremptorily, with all the authority of a senior officer, "you must not detain Mr. Dimblebee any longer. You forget that he is not an idle man, but has business of his own to attend to, and cannot afford to sit here chattering to you about Miss Fitzgerald and her uncle."

To do our host justice, he took my somewhat broad hint with a readiness for which I had hardly given him credit.

"Quite right, Captain Mannington," he said rising from his chair, and displaying a tact that many of his superiors might have copied. "Quite right; and I humbly beg pardon for intruding so long; but my foolish old tongue has a bad habit of running away

with me at times, and that strong port makes a man talkative before he knows what he's about. Good-night, gentlemen, good-night."

And, so saying, the worthy Dimblebee bowed himself out at the door, and disappeared, to be seen no more until the following day.

"Why the dickens did you send the old fellow away, Miles?" said Dicky, irritably, as soon as we were once more alone together.

"I thought he had been here long enough."

"Very provoking," went on Dicky, still in the same injured tone. "Just, too, when the strings of Mr. Dimblebee's tongue were becoming beautifully unloosened, and I was getting at everything I wanted to know."

"Do you really wish to hear my reason for asking him to depart?" And, as I spoke, I looked Dicky full in the face.

"Yes; I can't make you out at all. You're so deuced cross."

"Cross, am I? Perhaps you will think it still more cross, if I tell you, that I consider it a mean, ungentlemanly thing, for a man to worm information out of a common inn-keeper, respecting the young lady to whom he has signified—to a third party—his intention of paying his addresses. Either you like Miss Fitzgerald, Dicky, or you do not. But as to finding out beforehand all about her money, the exact amount of her yearly income, and general prospects of inheritance, I tell you to your face that such conduct disgusts me, and I will be no party to your mercenary proceedings, or sanction them in any way. Therefore I took it upon myself to dismiss Mr. Dimblebee."

And I made several strides up and down the room, in the vain hope of calming my indignation.

Dicky, as he listened to the above speech, turned red with anger.

"What an infernal ass you are, Miles," he retorted in far from friendly tones.

"Possibly. I don't pretend to being over-burdened

with brains, but I know what's right, and how a gentleman ought to behave."

"Do you mean to infer by those words that I am not one?"

"I infer nothing. I merely state a fact. If it disturbs your conscience, I am not responsible for the result."

Then, by a strong effort at self-control, I added, in a quieter voice, feeling too that perhaps I was a little hard upon him, and ought not to have testified my disapproval quite so forcibly:

"Come, come, Dicky, don't let us quarrel, there's a good fellow. We have long since agreed to disagree about the fair sex; so, for the sake of harmony, let us drop the subject under discussion, and think no more this evening of Miss Fitzgerald, and Miss Fitzgerald's fortune. If I have hurt your feelings, I apologize. All I meant to say, was, that surely such a girl is worthy to be loved for her own sake alone, without first going through a vast amount of mental arithmetic."

"Of course," acquiesced Dicky. "Nobody ever said the contrary."

"Well, you seemed to imply a certain doubt, at least, judging by your minute and searching questions, as to the L. S. D. part of the business. You are a first-rate chap, Dicky—in some ways, none better—but somehow or other, there is one curious defect in your composition."

"Indeed! And what might that be?"

"A sad deficiency of anything approaching to sentiment. You require a little romance."

Dicky turned a smiling countenance full upon mine; for to do him justice, his ill-humours were, as a rule, of very short duration, and quickly chased away by a soft word or two.

"And you," he said, with a twinkle in his eye, "possess a great deal too much of it. You do your best to appear a regular dry old fossil, but it's no go. Nature will out, and the flame will be all the fiercer for having been smothered so long."

The tell-tale colour rushed to my brow.

"Too much romance, Dicky! Why, what nonsense you're talking. Nobody has ever accused me of such a thing in my life until now."

He gave a light laugh.

"Poor old innocent woman-defender. Does it follow on that account that the accusation is not true? What would people say, I wonder, if the severe, the virtuous, the well-principled and highly moral Captain Mannington fell desperately in love with a young lady, said to be one of the richest heiresses in the land. How about mercenariness, interested motives, &c., then? Ha, ha, ha!"

And Dicky gave free vent to his mirth.

I pretended to treat his speculations with scorn; but, nevertheless, they left a sting behind them.

What would the world say, truly, if I, who had held my head so high, and constantly rebuked my brother officer for his calculating and money-seeking propensities, ended by following in his very footsteps?

The idea was so unpleasant and humiliating, that it kept me awake the greater part of the night.

When at last, towards morning, I fell into an agitated slumber, I dreamt strange dreams that literally seemed to turn my head, and deprive it of all powers of reasoning.

I dreamt I saw Nellie Fitzgerald, clad in white satin, with a wreath of orange blossoms on her dainty head, sitting siren-like at the foot of my bed, holding out both her little pink palms entreatingly towards me, whilst Sweetheart pawed impatiently at the clothes, and tried incessantly to prevent our coming together.

Then the scene changed, and Dicky was holding her down in a dark, deep lake. I could see her sinking, and sinking and sinking. A cruel light shone on his boyish face. I tried to save her, but some invisible force held me back. I strained and fought—all to no purpose. She disappeared, whilst I gazed in agony, and Dicky turned, and smiled upon me a smile of cold triumph. Then in my rage I seized him by the throat,

uttering meanwhile a desperate cry, and—awoke to find myself bathed in perspiration and trembling like a child in every limb.

CHAPTER VII

AN OFF DAY.

THE Whinboro' hounds did not go out on the following day, and although by training to covert we might have gone with a distant pack, we had not horses sufficient to hunt more than four or at most five times a week.

Therefore the morning was devoted to letter writing, and newspapers, and the perusal of Whyte-Melville's celebrated novel "Market Harborough." After lunch we both came to the conclusion that some exercise was absolutely indispensable, and consequently resolved to take a long walk into the country, and so obtain an appetite for dinner. "How about leaving Barrington's letter of introduction on Mr. Austen?" suggested Dicky; "it will give us an object for a constitutional, if nothing more; and I detest walking for walking's sake."

"All right," I assented. "We may as well call there, sooner as later, and if you are willing so am I."

Therefore, after having first ascertained from Mr. Dimblebee that Cattington Towers—the name of Mr. Austen's abode—was about four miles distant from Whinboro', we started along the high road, at a good brisk pace. Although not so cold as on the previous day, there was still a touch of frost in the air, which made the atmosphere feel keen and invigorating. As we trudged steadily on, we eyed each fence in succession with true fox-hunter's observation, and discussed the manner how, if called upon, we should endeavour to negotiate the various obstacles that presented themselves to our notice.

Thus time passed pleasantly and swiftly away. So swiftly indeed that we were quite surprised when we pulled up before a pretty ivy-grown lodge which guarded a fine gate, made of wrought iron, of very imposing appearance, and which, from its curious workmanship and solid proportions, evidently dated back to a remote period.

This gate opened into a noble drive, bordered on either side by grand old trees, whose naked branches even at this season of the year met overhead, and formed a thick tracery of interlacing twigs, through which the pale wintry sky peeped coldly clear.

After we had proceeded a couple of hundred yards or so, a sudden bend in the road revealed the house—a huge grey structure, of quaint and irregular architecture. It stood on an eminence, overlooking a large park, on whose green slopes browsed a herd of stately deer, who raised their pretty heads, sniffed the air, and walked calmly away, as we approached.

“By Jove! what a ripping place!” exclaimed Dicky approvingly. “I had no idea Mr. Austen was half such a swell. Miss Fitzgerald will indeed be a lucky young woman if she comes in for all this.”

And so saying he gave an energetic pull at the door bell, which after an interval, in accordance with the dignity of his appearance, was presently opened by a tall, white-powdered, silk-calved footman, who favoured us to a stony stare.

To Dicky's intense vexation, he was informed on enquiry that Mr. Austen and his niece were neither of them at home. He had therefore to content himself with leaving our cards, and the letter of introduction given him by Barrington.

“Awful nuisance their being out,” he said discontentedly, as we retraced our footsteps. “Somehow or other I made quite sure we should find them in.”

And so also had I.

As we walked away, I confess to a feeling of disappointment, much greater than the occasion seemed to warrant. I had imagined how pleasant it would be to

find oneself ushered into a warm, comfortable, prettily-furnished room, with Nell presiding at the tea-table, graciously supplying our wants, and perhaps even bringing us our cups with her own fair hands.

I had pictured how, loth to leave, we would linger on, listening to the musical sound of her soft young voice and silvery laughter, until dusk crept into the apartment, and reluctant even then to depart, we at last rose with many apologies as to the length of our visit, which Mr. Austen promptly silenced by a hearty invitation to come again and as often as we liked.

Such castles in the air had been very nice to build, and had grown with curious facility, but now, they all toppled down at one stroke, leaving me strangely sobered, when I realized, that for this day at least, there was no longer any chance of seeing Nell. There was nothing for it, however, but to tramp back to Whinboro'. Dicky at first was much inclined to expatiate on the beauties of Cattington Towers, and the great good fortune of the lucky individual destined to secure Miss Fitzgerald's hand, but after a time, finding my replies were exceedingly laconic, not to say repellent, and also having perhaps learnt a certain amount of discretion from our little encounter of the previous night, he gradually relapsed into silence. We swung our sticks, puffed at our cigars, and stretched our legs, but said never a word. I for one was not conversationally inclined.

But just as we were entering the town of Whinboro' our attention was attracted by the sound of jingling bells, which rang out merrily on the still air, and looking ahead, we perceived a smart pony-phaeton rapidly approaching. It was drawn by a pair of high-stepping cobs, and the driver proved to be a young lady, clad in a neat, dark tight-fitting tailor-made suit, by whose side sat an elderly gentleman.

One glance sufficed for me to recognize the pair; and, as I did so, I felt the colour mounting to my face, whilst the beats of my heart quickened sensibly.

A sudden flash which revealed a pretty girlish countenance, and then—Nell had vanished; leaving

behind her an agreeable impression of feminine freshness and rosiness.

"Well," observed Dicky, "I am glad to have met them, for it proves, at any rate, that they really were out when we called, and 'Not at home' meant the truth for once."

"It generally does, in the country," said I, rather grimly, for I had not yet altogether recovered from my disappointment, and, therefore, took extra pains to conceal it, by saying nothing which could provoke suspicion. "Callers are not so frequent here as they are in town, you may depend upon it."

"No, I suppose not. However, no matter. By the end of a week, I predict we shall have made great strides towards intimacy with Mr. Austen and Miss Fitzgerald. To tell you the truth, Miles, that girl fetches me uncommonly."

"And well she may," thought I, in my innermost heart, whilst bitter, sarcastic words rose to the tip of my tongue, but I refrained from uttering them, being determined not to lose my temper again, without great provocation, having already seen how it laid me open to attack.

Only somehow it *did* seem hard, that Dicky, who, to use his own elegant and expressive phraseology, was in a perpetual state of being "*fetched*" by the fair sex, should just happen to pick out the one girl I had seen in all my life, who, I felt, on nearer acquaintance, I could love, with all the intensity of which my nature was capable. At seven-and-twenty, I had already learnt I could not care for divers people. My disposition was too slow and too concentrated to have many loves. I was not one of those who could lightly change, or who, like Dicky, could forget the old affection and take up with the new. Once loved, always loved; that was how it would be with me, and therefore I felt half afraid of the unwonted feelings Nell Fitzgerald had given rise to. Already I was jealous of Dicky, and had spoken to him with a severity never engendered by any of his former escapades.

And now I was angry with myself for having done so—for having been so easily moved to wrath.

What business too, had I, a poor cavalry officer, with little beyond his pay, slender prospects, and a comparatively young father, to think of love and matrimony? A wife was a luxury only to be indulged in by the rich, and even if Nell were a hundred times more beautiful, still she could be nothing to me.

I was in no position to marry, however much I might desire to do so, whilst the very idea of being indebted to a woman for one's fortune was repugnant in the extreme.

Work?

Yes, I would work; ay and willingly too, had I but the chance. But in these days of competition, when our small island is densely over-populated, and almost every man is already struggling to obtain an honest livelihood, it is difficult to turn from the profession already adopted, and take up another, especially one that will pay.

Years of laborious toil would be required to gain even a modest independence.

And then, while I was working, why should a girl like Nell wait? What for? I had nothing to offer her. Neither wealth, rank, nor position. Only my love.

Why should she waste her youth? Why let her good looks fade, and the sunny spring-time of her life go by, waiting for an uncertainty that might never come off?

The thing was simply ridiculous. I recognized its absurdity without difficulty, and yet the absurdity was sweet. So sweet, that I told myself this madness which had taken possession of my senses must be crushed in its infancy. It must not have the least chance given it of increasing, or else it would grow to such proportions that in a very short time it would prove utterly ungovernable.

Nell must be stamped out of my heart.

But, ah me! in our pitiful human resolves is there

not always a "but," which contrives to destroy the whole? How charming she was! How simple and pretty and unaffected! I would stake my life as to her honesty and straightforwardness. Those eyes could only be the outward mirror of a frank and truthful disposition. I had never seen anybody the least like her before, and certainly no woman had ever raised in me such a tempest of emotion, or filled me with such vague longing.

Common sense bade me keep out of her way, shun her society as if she were some loathsome being, instead of the sweetest creature on earth, and flee from the temptation of her presence; but an inward force, stronger than common sense, and mightier than reason, goaded me on to make her acquaintance, and having once made it, to lose no opportunity of being near her.

So, although with widely different motives, Dicky Dawson's wishes and mine were identical. We both desired to see more of the girl in the brown habit. I, because I had fallen head over ears in love with her; he, because she found favour in his sight, and was said to be rich. The seeds of discord were already sown between us.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SIREN SHOWS TEMPER.

FORTUNATELY for my peace of mind, the next day (Wednesday) was a hunting one. Now, there is no remedy equal to active physical exercise for soothing Love's torments. The fresh air, the bustle and excitement, the necessity of exertion, and above all the spring of a good horse under one, are all things that serve, at any rate for the time being, to diminish any influence acquired by woman over man.

Once the fox is found and away, the genus *homo* is converted into a simple hunting animal, who, without

possessing the fine nose and scenting ability of the hound, is not one whit behind him in the matter of keenness. The intoxication of the chase seizes upon his senses, and drives away every other thought.

Besides which, I had my work cut out with The Siren.

I had not been on her back ten minutes, before I discovered that, to say the least of it, she was a very peculiar animal. True, just at first, I congratulated myself on the demure manner in which she walked out of the yard, switching her thin tail from side to side, and champing amiably at her bit. I had resolved to try her in a snaffle bridle, and so far was delighted with the result.

But by the time we had cleared the outskirts of the town, her ladyship's vagaries began, and shortly afterwards no doubt could be entertained as to the unpleasantness of her intentions and general obstinacy.

In order to arrive at the meet, it became necessary, when we had proceeded about five miles along the high road, to leave the macadam and go through a narrow bridle-gate, that led into a large grass field. Unfortunately, at the precise moment we turned towards this gate, a butcher's boy went by at a smart trot, mounted on a rough, shaggy-maned pony. When The Siren perceived them, nothing would induce her to go off the road. She had evidently made up her mind to follow in their wake, and throw in her lot—and consequently mine—with the youthful deliverer of meat. Now this resolution did not coincide with my views in the least.

At first I thought The Siren's reluctance to obey my bidding proceeded merely from a bit of temper, easily overcome if properly treated, and I tried patting her persuasively on the neck, and speaking to her in a coaxing voice; but the brute stuck her forelegs firmly in the ground, laid back her small, thin ears, and gave one or two very ugly, ominous shakes of her lean and wicked grey head.

Then I realized that it was a case of either her will

or mine proving triumphant; and I set my teeth for the coming struggle, resolving in my own mind who should gain the victory. For the first time I gave her a sharp touch with the spur. She snorted indignantly, rounded her back, shook her head more obstinately than ever, but as for moving, she never budged an inch.

"Go on, Dicky," I said. "Don't wait for me, or you will be late, to a certainty. It's twenty minutes to eleven now," taking a hasty look at my watch.

"Oh, never mind, old man!" he replied. "I'm not in any particular hurry, and I don't like leaving you in the lurch. It seems a shabby sort of thing to do."

"Thanks very much, Dicky; but, really, I had rather you went on. The Siren and I are bound to have a tussle, and there is no saying how long it may last. I'm pretty determined, at times, as you know, and I intend to wait at this gate all day long, rather than let the mare beat me."

"Well, if you really wish me to go," said Dicky, beginning to waver.

"I do. You can do me no good by staying. It is absolutely necessary that I should show myself The Siren's master; for, otherwise, she will be mine; and if so, I question much whether I should ever get a single fair day's work out of the brute. She has been accustomed of late to being driven by a man who was *afraid* of her."

Seeing me so decided, and knowing that it was impossible under the circumstances to offer any assistance, Dicky rode slowly on, hoping that before long I would overtake him.

Owing to a variety of petty disasters—bad ties, late breakfast, wrongly-fitting saddle, and so on, we had been late in starting, and now had little time to spare. Dicky, it is true, by brisk riding, might still arrive at the meet at the appointed hour, but another five minutes would be pretty well fatal to my chance of doing so. Knowing this, I determined the struggle should be short and decisive.

And now began a regular conflict between man and horse, in which both fought for supremacy of will. Whose would turn out the stronger? That was the question.

A quarter of an hour elapsed, without any decided issue. The Siren proved as obstinate as a mule. I freely admit that, at this juncture, I lost my temper, and made up my mind—all other tactics having failed—to regularly *beat* the devil out of her. Mark you, I had been very patient with her up till this, and had not ill-treated her in any way; but I was loth to give up a day's hunting, and perhaps lose *the* run of the season, simply on account of her villainous humours. To make a long story short, I raised my whip aloft—I had taken the precaution to provide myself with a cutting one at starting—and punished her as I have never punished an animal in my life and hope never to have to do again; for even while thus engaged I felt more than half ashamed of my own actions, although I was at my wits' end, and knew no other mode of conquering the mare.

Meanwhile, she kicked and plunged, all to no purpose. I had a tolerably strong seat, and practice in the riding-school had rendered it still firmer, so that I was not as easy to be dislodged as she imagined. Finding which, The Siren took to rearing most viciously. Up, up, higher and higher she went, until she almost lost her balance. A bright idea struck me. The next time she tried that game, I would pay her out in her own coin, even although I myself proved the sufferer. My blood was thoroughly heated, and once more, down came the whip with increased severity on her striped and foaming sides. By way of reply, she stood straight up on her hind legs, and pawed the air with her front ones. Now was the moment for putting my plan into execution.

I seized hold of the bridle and pulled it hard. The next minute we fell backwards, with great force, on the smooth hard road.

I think I must have been a little stunned by the

fall, for just at first I have no recollection of what took place. Directly I recovered from the concussion, I rose to my feet, and taking the bridle in my hand, managed, after a few seconds, to pull The Siren on to her legs. She looked a pitiable object, covered with dust, and was snorting with terror, and trembling in every limb. I passed my hand down her dripping neck, and spoke to her soothingly. The sound of my voice appeared to reassure her somewhat. She seemed quite cowed, and also a little dazed, as if she scarcely knew where she was. I waited a few minutes, in order to give her time to recover. Then I led her through the bridle gate! She offered no resistance, and this accomplished, I proceeded to mount as quickly and quietly as possible, and rode her backwards and forwards two or three times, opening and shutting the gate just as I chose. She was perfectly passive now, and I could do what I liked with her. A lamb could not have been more amiable and unresisting. Once fairly in the grass-field, I gave a light shake to the reins, and urged her into a canter. She dropped her head, and went bounding away over the springy turf like an india-rubber ball.

To do her justice, she was a remarkably fine mover. Her long, low strides covered the ground without effort, in a truly wonderful manner.

After a bit, she began to warm to her work, and cocked her ears and showed various signs of life. She gradually rose in my esteem. I spoke to her at intervals, having a great belief in the effect produced on dumb animals by the sound of the human voice. I have ever found it possess a tranquillizing and cheering influence. Thus, we went steadily on, for about a quarter of an hour, getting on better terms with each other at every step, and increasing the speed as we went along.

Still, I looked forward to nothing better than a stern chase, and probably having to ride miles all round the country in pursuit of the hounds, when to my great delight, on mounting a tolerably stiff hill, I saw the

whole Field in the valley beneath me, approaching in my direction. I pulled up, in order to give The Siren her wind. They had evidently drawn the first covert blank, and were now on their way to try another.

Until this moment I had never given a thought to my personal appearance, but now the knowledge that it was not quite as it should be was forced upon me by Dicky, who, directly he perceived me, ranged up alongside, and said, anxiously:

"Hulloa! old man. What's the matter? Not hurt, I hope?"

"No," I replied; "nothing to speak of, only a bit shaken. The mare took to rearing, so, as I saw no other way of conquering her temper, I pulled her over backwards, and the pair of us got rather a heavy fall. But," I continued, with a smile of satisfied triumph, "I've taken the devil out of her, Dicky, as I said I would."

"Trust you for that."

"I had a tremendous fight, but in the end I have proved myself the master."

"Yes," said Dicky, "at the cost of a brand new hat, price five-and-twenty shillings. Expensive work, Miles."

"So it is," I acquiesced, as I took it off, and surveyed the battered crown that was squashed out of all semblance of shape. "Well, never mind," I continued, as after several endeavours to restore it to its original condition I once more replaced it on my head. "I dare say there's somebody in the town who can block it out, and sooner or later, hunting hats all meet with the same fate. They never last long."

"Yours don't," said Dicky. "You seem to be peculiarly unlucky, and to have a knack of tumbling on the crown of your head. Some of these days you'll get concussion of the brain."

"Yes," retorted I, "and some of these days we both shall die. But in the meantime it is foolish to anticipate evil."

Dicky looked at me critically, but concernedly.

"Are you aware, old chap," he said, after a pause, "that your face is all cut and scratched about, and that you have got a black eye as inky as a prize-fighter's?"

"Have I? How lovely I must look. By-the-by, is Miss Fitzgerald out?"

"No—at least I have seen nothing of her as yet."

"Ah, then you have not been able to make the running."

"How could I? I fancy she and her uncle must be reserving their steeds for Friday. Dimblebee says it is one of the Whinboro's best meets, right in the cream of the grass country."

"Very likely," said I, with an assumption of indifference, such as I did not altogether feel; for to be quite honest, I was rather relieved that Nell was not there to see me in my present condition, being keenly conscious that I was ugly enough by nature without any additional disfigurement. "And now for a run," I concluded hopefully. "Somehow or other, since my tussle with her ladyship, I feel in a regular *going* mood to-day."

"A break-neck one, you mean," rejoined Dicky warningly. "Do, Miles, take care of that great hulking carcass of yours. Worthless as it is, I have an affection for it, and don't want to see you come to hopeless grief."

"Hopeless grief! Bah! Why, you'll make me funk if you are so solemn, Dicky. To hear you talk, one would think I was going to meet with an instantaneous death."

"It's all very fine, chaffing," objected he; "but I tell you what it is, Miles, I don't half like The Siren," eyeing that now peaceable animal disapprovingly. "She's a nasty, dangerous brute."

"And so are you, when you go a-hunting."

"Me?" asked Dicky innocently.

"Yes," said I, with a laugh. "When you go heiress hunting, I mean. Dangerous to the poor young ladies, *of course*."

Dicky gave a gratified smile, not detecting the implied sarcasm. His vanity was superbly proof against all minor attacks; but in Nell's absence, I felt kindly disposed towards him, for he had evinced a genuine anxiety as to my safety that could not help touching me a little. In spite of his faults he was a real good fellow at bottom.

CHAPTER IX.

A QUICK BURST.

By this time we had arrived at the covert-side. The place now to be drawn was a nice compact little gorse enclosure, that gave every indication of affording some sport. Nor were appearances belied; for we had not stood many minutes, before a loud Tally-ho testified to the welcome fact of Reynard's being at home. In another second any further conversation was completely put a stop to, by his taking to his heels and the open country.

During the short period we had remained inactive, I was pleased to see that The Siren did not behave like a novice. Instead of staring stupidly about her, or fidgetting all over the place with excitement, she displayed various symptoms that showed she was used to the chase and took great interest in it. For instance, she kept her ears well cocked, and her head aloft, as if eagerly listening to every sound; and then, when she heard the music of the hounds ring out, she turned off her own accord like a practised hunter, and moved in the direction from which the musical notes proceeded.

All this gave me confidence, and as soon as the pack were once fairly started on the line of their fox, I let her go, and was shortly galloping hard in pursuit.

There was a scent to-day and no mistake. If a man would secure a start he must not spare his horse, otherwise he stood in danger of seeing the flying

beauties vanish altogether from his sight. Just for a few seconds, when the hounds first emerged from the covert, they hesitated; then, with one accord, they flung themselves forward, with a dash and a keenness glorious to witness. They flashed across the big open pastures like a streak of silver, running meanwhile almost mute, without a single babbler or skirter in their close, serried ranks.

We crammed down our hats, threw away our cigars, settled ourselves in the saddle, and prepared to ride hard. I had been fortunate in securing an excellent start, and not more than five minutes had elapsed, before I discovered that The Siren possessed a capital turn of speed. Many thoroughbreds are deusive in this respect. They *look* like galloping till you come to try them; but when they face the fatiguing ridge and furrow of a grass country, they roll about as helplessly as a toy wooden boat on the ocean waves, plunging heavily down into the depths and then laboriously scaling the heights. But The Siren seemed no stranger to a fifty-acre Leicestershire field, and she skimmed along with short, active strides, nicely apportioned to the occasion, every now and then changing her feet with lightning-like rapidity.

The pace was first-rate, but she was going well within herself, and what pleased me more than all, really seemed as if she thoroughly enjoyed the chase, and fully entered into the spirit of the thing. Whatever an animal's faults may be, I always like a horse whose heart is in his work; and so far there was no doubt about The Siren's being in the right place. She was straining every nerve to get nearer the hounds, and her eyes were steadily fixed upon their mottled quarters.

The question was, how would she jump? Until now a couple of open gates had served us well, and obviated any necessity of risking one's neck, but soon a long, low line of black, crossing the light green field, showed that a fence was close at hand. My spirits rose at the sight. Galloping over smooth sound turf is very delightful, but it lacks that element of danger which

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constitutes one of the principal charms of fox hunting. If it were always safe, easy work, I do not believe we should care for the sport half as much as we do. We should not feel nearly as proud when we vanquish our fears and go at a big fence, or as rejoiced when we have beaten our neighbours in a flying forty minutes. And yet it is a great mistake to suppose that everybody can gallop. It is by no means an easy accomplishment, and not one man or woman in a hundred knows how to make full use of his horse's speed, or turn it to best advantage. Rabbit holes, cart-ruts, unsuspected bogs and hidden drains, exercise a certain restraining influence over the majority, with whom imaginary terrors often outweigh the actual ones.

I always think it is a beautiful sight, to see two or three men boldly single themselves out from their companions, and simultaneously charge an awkward looking fence, in spots of their own choosing. It speaks well for the pluck and dash of the Mother Country, which in these days we often hear decry.

Not feeling altogether sure how The Siren might perform in a crowd, and knowing her to be uncommonly handy with her heels, I had taken the precaution of riding a little to the right, apart from the bulk of the Field. I now set her at the fence. She rushed at it a thousand miles an hour. But, alas! I suppose the reminiscences of the shafts were still too strong and too recent to admit of her putting her good intentions into execution. She came round so suddenly, that I almost lost my balance. But I was not to be denied, especially when hounds were running like wild-fire, and looked as if they would continue doing so.

I turned back a few yards, took her tight by the head, gave her a dig with the spurs, and in another second, over we were! This time The Siren jumped well, and never offered to refuse. She took off exactly right, and landed far into the opposite field. In fact she would almost have cleared a river, and although I recognized immediately that she might prove rather awkward to handle at a crampy double—being evidently

a flyer by nature—or at a stiff flight of rails such as I had jumped with Obadiah, I felt there was no great fear of her leaving her hind legs in any of the ditches. And the satisfaction of knowing this much was considerable, since, as before stated, they were extra big, at least they seemed so to me, who was not accustomed to a flying country.

But the mare wanted “hands.”

She pulled a goodish bit, and yet had so fine a mouth that it would hardly bear a touch. I quickly discovered that she required to be left absolutely alone at her fences. The smallest restraint made her jump low, and brush through them, which when you have a stiff top-binder to deal with is not altogether pleasant ; but I soon found out, that if her head were left quite free, she got up in the air very well indeed, although I did not imagine timber would ever prove her “forte.” Still she ought to turn out a grand water-jumper, and anyhow it was a pleasure to be on an animal who could gallop. That is why I dearly love a blood-horse. Get a good one, up to some weight, and they are merely cantering, whilst their more plebeian brethren are putting their very best foot foremost.

We had now been going at almost racing speed, for something over twenty minutes, and the pace was beginning to tell. The Field had thinned visibly, and was rapidly growing more and more select, especially as a couple of very ugly, hairy fences had choked off all but the bolder spirits. Those who remained, however, were clearly bent on riding, and doubtless would prove difficult to beat.

Looking back, I could see that a long string of scarlet dotted the green pastures for nearly a mile in the rear ; and amongst the toilers I fancied I could detect Dicky.

My whole frame thrilled with ecstasy. The blood seemed literally to dance in my veins. Was there ever such a sport as this same fox-hunting ? Did it not beat that of every other country ? Was it possible for any other to compare with it ?

I could imagine none—save perhaps the excitement of a battle-field, and a dashing cavalry charge of few against many, where spear clashed with spear, and steel with steel. My thoughts were a trifle sobered by a huge double oxer immediately ahead. The tall, pale young man on the gallant bay horse, who, up to this point, had been cutting out the work, took a pull at his steed, and hesitated for a second or two. The obstacle looked decidedly formidable; and any other would have been preferable, had there been time to gaze about, and pick and choose. But there was none; and, nasty as the oxers were, with their thick, straggly, overgrown fence between them, I knew that they were exactly suited to The Siren's free style of jumping.

Therefore I charged the impediment manfully, thinking I would leave it all to the mare. Neither was my confidence misplaced.

Her blood was thoroughly up by this time, and I do not believe she would have turned her head from a house. She rushed at the fence in her usual somewhat wild manner, and—flew the whole thing like a bird.

"Well done, old lady!" I said, giving her a pat of commendation on landing. "You're a real good 'un, whatever your faults may be."

For my immediate follower had come an imperial crowner, and his long limbs were measuring mother earth. I saw, however, that he was not hurt, so pursued my way serenely, whilst my heart gave a great triumphant leap. Not at his downfall, poor fellow! for he had gone right gallantly and well, but at my own, or rather, The Siren's, success.

For now I was actually *leading* the Field!!

Oh! proud position. None prouder, for a young man and a stranger, than to prove himself the equal of good sportsmen in their own country.

He goes forth timid, he comes back strong; he starts, uncertain of his own powers, he returns, feeling they have been fully tested, and come well out of the ordeal. He begins by finding himself ignored, pooh-poohed, probably laughed at; he ends by being respected, if not

liked—and by being incorporated amongst the riding members of the Hunt. For men may be jealous of each other's powers, but, as a rule, they are fair; and each person's place is justly apportioned to him, according to his merits. The pretender cannot pretend long; or the swaggerer, swagger loudly in the Hunting Field. His companions are too keen-sighted and observant not to know all his little peccadilloes by heart. So when the huntsman galloped by me, and said respectfully—casting a hasty glance of admiration at the now panting Siren—"Good mare that, sir, you are on. That double oxer has choked most of them off," I could not help feeling as proud as a king.

What if my new hat were crushed, my eye blackened, and my beauty spoilt?

I had the keen satisfaction of knowing that the poor despised twenty-eight-pound screw had turned out trumps, and I could afford to laugh at Mr. Martingale, when I went back to Whinboro'.

CHAPTER X.

PRIDE HATH A FALL.

MEANWHILE the hounds were in full view of their fox, and a bloodthirsty chorus filled the air. It put fresh life into the horses, who, although not positively distressed, were beginning to show signs of having had enough. There had been no check to let them get their wind, and not a few were sobbing audibly.

In fact, it was a regular Leicestershire burst, such as I had often read about, with feelings of envy, but never participated in until to-day.

A great, upstanding bullfinch, black as night, offered no serious resistance to my victorious career.

Swish! scratch! scramble! and with the blood spurting from a long tear on my right cheek, and a thorn sticking in the toe of my boot, we were over, or rather

through, The Siren shaking her head gaily on landing, as much as to say, "Impetus does wonders." And now poor Pug's little span of life seemed pretty well at an end. He had made a bold bid for his brush, but it was not to prove successful. Every hound in the pack was clamouring murder, as, with bristles up and gleaming eyes, they gradually gained inch by inch upon him. Still he struggled on, but his lissom limbs were getting stiff, and his red-brown coat was dark with perspiration. We were galloping hard, through a large grass field. I had managed to repass the huntsman, and was now a few yards in advance, but he was close at my heels, accompanied by some half-dozen good men and true.

In the middle of this field, I suddenly saw a deep narrow ditch, whose rounded banks were literally overgrown with yellow edish. Excited by the near presence of other horses, or perhaps reminded of her racing days, The Siren had grown very eager, and snatched wildly at her bit. I tried to take a pull, but she tossed up her head and changed her legs, which only lost me ground without producing the desired effect. I wanted her to *see* what she was coming to, and not, because the ditch was small, ignore it altogether. But her eyes were fixed on the hounds, and despite my efforts, she galloped straight into it, and turned a complete somersault.

For some seconds, I suppose I must have lost consciousness; anyhow, I lay where I fell, doubled up in an uncomfortable attitude on the grass, while the mare pinned me down by both legs, so that I could not possibly rise. Two or three people kindly rushed to my assistance, and soon succeeded in rescuing me from this disagreeable position, rendered the more so as The Siren showed symptoms of using her heels. As it was, I received rather a nasty kick on the head, which did not conduce towards my clearness of vision.

Nevertheless, my first sensation on rising from the ground was one of pleasure, at finding that the hounds had run into their fox close by, and that my fall had not prevented me from being in at the death. My

next was hardly so agreeable. I found myself so dizzy and shaken, that I feared I was hardly up to riding any more that day. Indeed, I was not altogether certain, whether I had escaped without a broken bone. My breath came and went in painful catches.

"Here, take a taste of brandy out of my flask," said the young man on the bay, who had come to grief over the double oxer, and whose name it appeared was Captain Hooper. He had just ridden up, and I was glad to see, seemed none the worse for his fall, nor to have been long detained by it.

"Thank you," I said, rather faintly.

"Don't be afraid; take a good pull at it," went on Captain Hooper. "I've more than I shall want myself, and there's nothing like brandy for bringing a fellow round, when he's knocked a bit out of time."

I followed his advice and was grateful for it, since I quickly began to feel more like myself again. The black spots left off dancing before my eyes, and I could see everything clearly.

"There! you are better already," said Hooper. "The colour is beginning to come back to your face. How did that mare put you down?"

I explained the manner in which the catastrophe had happened.

"I'm not surprised," observed my new friend. "She's a rusher, and just the animal to stick her forefeet into a drain like this, especially when she got excited. Have you had her long?"

"No, only about a fortnight. This is the first time I have ridden her with hounds, so I did not know much about her performances, at starting."

"Well, she is a brilliant huntress. I thought very few horses in the country could beat my old bay, but she fairly stumped him over that double oxer. I was just behind you, and I believe your mare must have cleared close upon eight-and-twenty feet. She made an extraordinary jump."

"She is pretty good at width," said I, feeling gratified by Captain Hooper's praise, for there is no surer

means of gaining a man's liking than by approving of his horse, "and I think she'll turn out a good 'un."

"Think!" exclaimed he. "I don't *think* about it at all. I'm sure of it." And he proceeded to pass his right hand down the mare's fore-legs. "Hulloa!" he said. "She has over-reached; and, what's more," leading her on a pace or two, "she is going lame on it."

"That's an infernal nuisance," said I. "I intended staying out in hopes of seeing another run, and now I suppose I ought to take her home."

"No doubt about it; besides, my dear fellow, if you will excuse my saying so, you are hardly fit to ride yourself. You are a deal more shaken than you will admit. Have you far to go?"

"No, only to Whinboro'. My friend Dawson and I are staying there at the hotel."

"Oh! indeed. Then you are Captain Mannington, I suppose? I told my missis to drop a card on you to-day. You see," apologetically, "we hunting men have not much time for that sort of thing; and paste-board leaving is quite out of my line."

"So I should imagine," said I, with a smile. "How many days a week do you hunt?"

"Six, as a rule."

"Pretty hard work, that."

"I would hunt seven, if I could, only it leaves one very little time for anything else. Ha, the hounds are moving on, so I must be off. We shall draw Nuttington Sticks next."

And Captain Hooper, who appeared a veritable enthusiast, prepared to remount his good bay horse, who, having got his wind, seemed quite fresh again.

"Go straight home," he said, as he trotted away; "for, if you don't consider your own self worth taking care of, the mare is, at any rate; and, by-the-by, if you have nothing better to do on Sunday, come up to lunch. My wife is always at home, even if I am not. You will find my address on the card."

And, so saying, he took his departure, leaving me reluctantly to turn towards home. I was, as Hooper had declared, more shaken than I would admit; but The Siren's over-reach decided me; and as we crawled along, she very lame, and I very stiff, comfortable visions of a blazing fire and a good capacious arm-chair rose to my mind's eye. I would coddle for the whole of one long afternoon, if only in hopes of getting out hunting again on the morrow. I had come to the conclusion that there were no bones injured, which, hitherto, had been my chief anxiety, for to be laid up at the beginning of one's leave, with a broken collar-bone, would have been a most confounded nuisance.

When I entered the stable-yard I was met by Martingale, who, with a face expressive of great concern, advanced towards me upon my arrival.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, giving a dismal shake of the head, "I feared as much. I knowed as how she would never turn out a hunter."

Bad as I felt, I could not conceal my elation at being able to contradict the great man's assertions, and prove him in the wrong.

"Then you knew a little too much," said I. "She has given me a couple of falls, certainly, neither of them very light, or pleasant ones; but we have had a brilliant five-and-twenty minutes, and I was never better carried in my life. So there!"

Martingale's countenance, on receipt of this unexpected intelligence, was a study in itself. He first looked incredulous, then tried to appear pleased, but in the latter endeavour he failed altogether.

"H'm!" he said, dubiously. "And can she jump?"

"Jump? Yes, rather. She cleared a double oxer with me in such form that the huntsman himself congratulated me on possessing so smart an animal. And what's more, she went at it, *first*, without a lead. Pretty good, that, for a cabby, eh, Martingale?"

With the astounding aptitude for picking up infor-

mation regarding any animal under their charge peculiar to gentlemen of Mr. Martingale's profession, that individual knew as much about the mare's antecedents as I did myself, whence arose, in part, the contempt which he invariably displayed when speaking of The Siren. He thought nothing whatever of a horse who had not cost three hundred guineas. Any hunter under that price was, in his opinion, not worth looking at, and could not possibly turn out a success.

"If you wants a good article, you must pay for it," was one of his favourite sayings, and one which met with great approval amongst his large circle of acquaintances, saddlers, smiths, forage dealers, &c. He was always consistent in his sentiments; and when similar ones are cherished at another man's expense, they are always certain to bring great glory and respect to the liberal propounder.

"Not such a bad performance, that, was it?" I repeated, heartily enjoying poor Martingale's discomfiture, and pressing for an answer.

He was too much overcome, however, to find one as readily as usual.

"Well, I'm dashed!" he exclaimed, after a lengthened pause, and he spoke the words like a person who has received an unexpected blow in the stomach. Then he recovered himself slightly, and added: "All I can say is this, Captain Mannington; if that there mare can jump with her back and them loins, then it upsets all my theories as to what a hunter should be, and how he ought to look."

"Well, you see, horses are very deceptive animals, and it does not always do to judge by appearances alone," said I, coolly.

"Quite so," assented Martingale, seeking for consolation in some other hypothesis. "And it's my belief, that a mare like The Siren might very possibly spurt over a good big fence or two at starting, but I'll be bound she can't stay."

"Wrong again," said I, gleefully. "She hardly turned a hair."

"But she gave you a couple of falls, Captin."

"Yes; not jumping, however. One was on the way to covert, when she showed a bit of temper, and the other happened through her galloping into a nasty little blind ditch."

"Humph!" ejaculated Martingale, discontentedly, for I could clearly see he was very loth to find his predictions falsified, and refused to believe any good of The Siren. "It don't much matter *how* things happen. I judge by the results."

"Exactly, and so do I."

"That mare's been the means of hurting you badly, Captin," said Martingale, as I tried to descend from the saddle, and found that I could not dismount without aid. "She'll be the death of you one of these days. You mark my words."

"Nothing of the sort," said I. "And as for being hurt, I'm not killed this time."

"No, and lucky too," muttered the unconvinced Martingale. "Go into the house, Captin, and get a nice warm bath. It'll do you more good than anything; especially if you put a few drops of arnica into the water. You'll be pretty stiff by to-morrow I reckon."

"I hope not," I responded, cheerfully. "By the way, I'm sorry to say, the mare has got an over-reach between the hoof and hair. She came home lame."

Martingale stooped down, and at once inspected the injury.

"It's nothing to speak of, Captin," he said, reassuringly. "She's tender on it now, but a day or two will put it all right. The skin is hardly broken, and she will be round 'fore you are."

"Then she must make haste, Martingale, for I intend to go out hunting again to-morrow."

He shook his head.

"What a man *intends*, and what he *does*, are often two very different things," he said, sententiously. Whereupon he led The Siren into her box, and being assured that she was in good hands, I proceeded to

hobble upstairs as best I could, and don a loose, warm smoking suit, made of dark blue serge, with bird's-eye facings.

CHAPTER XL.

MAKING FRIENDS.

ON taking a hasty glance at my own reflection in the glass, I own to having felt a little startled at the dilapidated appearance I presented.

My coat was not only torn, but plastered all over with mud; my hat resembled nothing so much as the typical head-gear of an inebriated Irishman, fresh from a street row; my right cheek was badly scratched, and the blood had trickled down and coagulated on the white collar; whilst, as for my left eye, it was almost entirely bunged up by a swelling mass of livid purple flesh.

It is not often that a man is struck by a sense of his own ugliness. Generally, he has become so habituated to it as to be either resigned or indifferent; but, as I scrutinized my disordered image in the glass, the following displeasing thought flashed through my brain. "Ugh! how is it possible for any nice girl to care for such a repulsive-looking devil? The very sight of you is enough to set her against you."

And, almost unconsciously, I found myself envying Dicky his good looks, and for the first time ever since I had known him, wishing that I too had blue eyes, chestnut hair that curled naturally, and a fresh pink and white complexion. I was convinced that such things went a long way with women.

"Perhaps," I said to myself, heaving an inward sigh, "if I were like Dicky, I also might have a chance with Nell. At all events, I should start fair, but as it is—bah!" breaking off with impatient self-scorn. "I can't think what on earth has come over me. Fancy

a man caring for his personal appearance, and setting any store by it. Why, I must be turning woman."

And I resolutely set to work to banish such vain longings, keeping my eyes religiously averted from the looking-glass, whilst I completed my toilet.

A quarter of an hour afterwards, book in hand, I took up a position in the big arm-chair of which I had dreamed during my slow, cold homeward ride. A bright fire blazed on the hearth, and our small sitting-room looked both cosy and cheerful. As I listened to the wind howling outside, I almost persuaded myself that I had the best of it. Anyhow, before long I reverted to a tranquil and satisfied state of mind, and laying my book aside, began to reflect on the events of the day.

After all, things might have been ever so much worse. I might have broken an arm or a leg, and been laid up for weeks; or the mare might have injured herself very seriously; whereas, with moderate luck, the probabilities were that by the beginning of the week we should both be in a position to take the field again. And, at any rate, if my day's hunting had been short, it had been very sweet; so sweet, that it would live in my recollection for evermore, and be garnered away in my memory as a fresh and delightful experience. In coming to the Shires, I had half-feared disappointment. I had heard so much about them, that I fancied their perfections would probably prove enormously exaggerated; but a single morning's sport was enough to teach me that the reality far outstripped report.

Galloping over nothing but grass was glorious work. It gave you such an exquisite sensation of *flying* through the air; and, although the fences were big, they seemed twice as easy, when the take-off was good. During the whole time we had been running, I could not remember having come across a single ploughed field. Sound, well-drained turf, had stretched like a billiard board in every direction. Such vast and undulating expanses of green were pleasant to the eye,

They soothed and charmed it. And what speed the hounds showed!

People might say what they liked about the superior merits of good, slow, old-fashioned hunting, but there was nothing in the whole world so exhilarating and intoxicating as—*pace!* Nothing that made a man's blood glow, and his heart beat, and his pulses quicken, in the same ecstatic manner.

And then I took to going over the entire run from start to finish, and recalling each separate fence. How, at this one, The Siren had made a truly magnificent bound, and at that one, she had taken off a trifle too soon, and if all were to come over again, I would ride her at it somewhat differently—just a wee bit slower. True, she had negotiated the obstacle all right, but if we had happened to come to grief I should have blamed myself a little. I believe most horsemen are subject to similar reminiscences, and fits of self-censure, so I hope you will bear with mine, more especially as my meditations were shortly disturbed by the entry of Mr. Dimblebee, who appeared, bearing in his hand an electro-plated salver, on whose shiny surface reposed a couple of thin white cards.

"Please, sir," he said, "Mrs. Hooper called this afternoon, and left these for you and Mr. Dawson. She said I was to be sure and see that you had them."

I took up the cards and saw that they bore the name of Captain Hooper, The Lodge, Whinboro'!

"Can you tell me who this gentleman is!" I enquired. "I made his acquaintance out hunting to-day, and he goes right well, which is something in his favour."

"A good deal," answered Dimblebee. "But wherever hounds go, there Captain Hooper is sure to follow. Nothing stops him."

"He seems a good sort of fellow. He was very kind to me when I fell. Gave me some brandy out of his own flask, and appeared quite concerned."

"Yes, that's the way with them out-and-out sportsmen. They're always the first to come to a comrade's

assistance. They're never jealous or disagreeable like. As for the Captain, he's a nice quiet gentleman all round. Nobody would think to see him out of the saddle that he was such a desperate bruiser in it. He gives one the idea of being too easy-going to exert himself."

"Is he always very well mounted?" I asked. "That was an uncommonly nice horse he rode to-day. A bright bay, who showed a lot of quality and a grand fencer."

"Ah! that's Captain Hooper's old favourite. Jumping Jim he calls him. He refused three hundred guineas for him only last winter."

"Well, as hunters go now-a-days, I have no doubt he is worth that sum. But I should have thought a man like Captain Hooper would go in for making and breaking his own horses."

"Lor' bless you, sir, so he does. He has no end of young 'uns up at his place there. People say as how he makes a lot of money by them."

"He is fairly entitled to do 'bat, if he risks his neck as gallantly as he did to-day. He led us most of the way." I was too modest to mention to Mr. Dimblebee that I also had assisted in doing so. A good sportsman ought never to talk much of his own performances. He should always leave other people to find them out; for, in hunting, as in everything else, "self-praise is no praise."

"He generally does," said Mr. Dimblebee. "Take him all round, Captain Hooper is the best man we have got. He's always there or thereabouts."

Our further conversation was here brought to an end, by the sound of bells outside in the street, accompanied by the quick trampling of horses' feet when suddenly pulled up to a stand-still.

Mr. Dimblebee went to the window and looked out.

"Why! bless me!" he exclaimed, "I declare if that ain't Mr. Austen and Miss Nell! Excuse me, sir! I must go this minute and see what they want."

And the worthy man hurried out of the room in hot haste.

Directly he had departed, I made a supreme effort, rose from the arm-chair—for, sitting before a hot fire, after a bad fall, is apt to make one feel very lazy—and limped to the window. Then—shall I confess it? I hid carefully behind the heavy red rep curtain, and with a curious palpitation of the heart, gazed down upon my divinity.

Yes, there she was sure enough; sitting very upright in the pony-phaeton (I could not fancy her slouching), holding the reins in her hands.

I could only see the crown of her little felt hat, for she was too directly beneath me to allow of her face being visible, a fact which I greatly deplored. I experienced, however, a shy content in watching her gestures, and remained at my post, until to my extreme astonishment the door opened, and no less a person than Mr. Austen himself entered the room.

I started at being thus caught staring down the street, and watching like a child who the visitors might be; but, taking no notice of my confusion, he advanced towards me with a pleasant smile.

"How do you do?" he said. "I am sorry to hear from Mr. Dimblebee that you have had such a bad fall. He has been telling me about it, and perhaps I ought not to have come up and disturbed you, only sometimes on these occasions one is inclined to mope, and a little society proves beneficial. But if you don't want me send me away."

He was a very nice-looking old gentleman, hearty, kindly, and cheery, and he spoke in such a friendly way, that I took to him at once. He appeared to possess that rare gift of sympathy which sets people at their ease on very short acquaintance, besides—he was Nell's uncle, a fact, which in itself entitled him to respect, and predisposed me in his favour.

"I certainly shall do nothing of the sort," I replied with an answering smile. "I was just beginning to find number one remarkably bad company, and am most grateful to you for your visit. It will do me an immensity of good."

"I am afraid you are badly hurt," said Mr. Austen, looking with evident concern at my bruised and inflamed countenance. "Did the horse kick you?"

"Yes, once or twice."

"So Mr. Dimblebee informed me."

"Ah! I see he has exaggerated the affair altogether. Believe me it is not very serious and I fully intend to be out hunting again by to-morrow or next day."

Mr. Austen looked doubtful, but he said, "I only hope that you may; more especially as one of my objects in calling was to ask if you and Mr. Dawson would give me the pleasure of your company at dinner on Saturday evening. We have no party, and shall probably be quite by ourselves, but Nell and Barrington were great friends when he was here, and she would like to hear all about him from you."

The mention of Nell's name reminded me that she was probably waiting outside. My notions of hospitality were wounded by such an idea.

"I am afraid," I said hesitatingly, and as I spoke, I could feel myself, to my intense annoyance, turning scarlet—"I am afraid that this is only a bachelor's room, but it is very cold to-day, and if—your niece—Miss Fitzgerald I mean—would not mind coming in, I—I—would do my best to make her comfortable."

To tell the truth, I was so astounded at the audacity of the above proposition, that I almost gasped for breath when I had made it. Entertaining ladies had not hitherto been much in my line. I left all that sort of thing to Dicky, who if at home would have proved quite equal to the occasion; whereas I knew that I stuttered, and stammered and blushed, in such an absurd manner, that Mr. Austen could only doubt the sincerity of my invitation, or put me down as a regular "softy." And no man likes to be considered the latter by one of his own sex. Altogether I experienced a sense of relief when my companion replied, in his cheery off-hand manner:

"Thanks, very much, but Nell has to execute several commissions in the town, and if you won't mind put-

ting up with an old fogey for so long, we have arranged that she is to come back and fetch me again, in about twenty minutes' time."

"*Mind!*" I exclaimed, "I shall only be too delighted." And I think Mr. Austen was pleased by the manner in which I said the words, for to old people there is a subtle flattery in finding the young appreciate and like their company. And I honestly did so, partly on account of his relationship and evident devotion to Nell, and partly through compassion at the sadness of his life's history—the dead boy and poor mad wife—I felt strangely drawn towards Mr. Austen.

Up till this moment we had both remained standing.

"Will you not sit down?" I asked, pushing my own seat towards him.

He took a chair, but not the one offered by me.

"No, no," he said, with another of his genial smiles. "That is an invalid's prerogative, and in your present condition you require such small comforts far more than I do. Why, do you know," and he looked me earnestly in the face, "if you were not quite so much knocked about, I should feel sorely tempted to administer a severe lecture on the follies of hard riding? Nell tells me you are a regular bruiser, but there," with an indulgent shake of the head, "you young men are all alike, and I suppose we should not like you if you had not some pluck in you; but when you come to my time of life, then perhaps you will begin to think twice about risking your bones."

I flushed up red with pleasure. It was very flattering to my self-esteem to find that Miss Fitzgerald had noticed me, even in the smallest degree, though how she had contrived to distinguish me from Dicky I was at a loss to understand. I could only presume that Mr. Dimblebee had been her informant.

"Your niece goes very hard herself!" I said. "I have never seen a lady ride better, or indeed, to speak quite correctly, so well. She is a perfect picture on horseback."



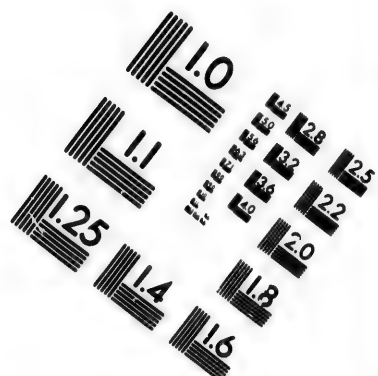
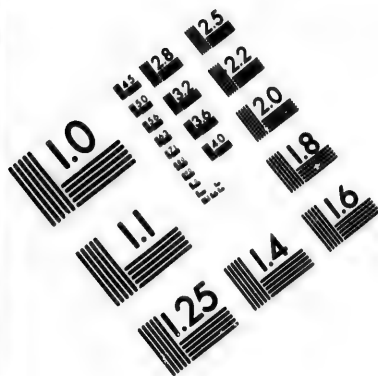
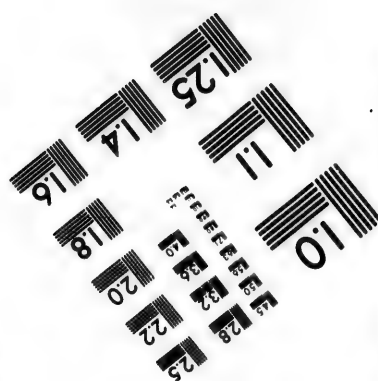
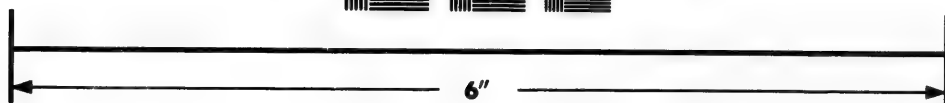
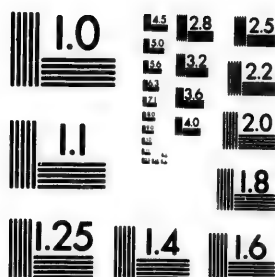


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The next minute I could have bitten out my tongue, for allowing my enthusiasm to master me to such an extent; but fortunately the observation did not appear to astonish Mr. Austen in the slightest, probably he was used to hearing his niece's horsemanship praised in glowing terms, and knew that it deserved every commendation. A shade passed over his face.

"Ah!" he said, with a downward droop of his clean-shaven lip. "Hunting is the only thing Nell and I fall out about. We are a most amicable couple, as a rule, but I can't bear to see the child incurring any danger. It makes my blood run cold."

"I can easily understand that."

"And, you see, Nell does not know what nerves mean. I have lost one creature that I loved," and Mr. Austen stifled a sigh, "I cannot afford to lose another. Nell, of course, hardly understands this, and is inclined to laugh a little at what she deems my unnecessary fears. Besides, she has the true sporting instinct strongly implanted within her bosom. She takes it from her father, and it is in the blood."

"Well!" said I. "In my humble experience, I have invariably found that those men and women who are fond of healthy, honest, out-door pursuits, have a great deal more in them, are pleasanter, more straightforward, natural, dependable, and upright, than the unfortunate beings—for they are greatly to be pitied—who care neither for horse or hound, and who cannot comprehend the simple, wholesome pleasure included in that one word, Sport. What would our English country life be without it? Mere stagnation."

"Yes, yes, that is very true," assented Mr. Austen. "And I would not have Nell different even if I could. She is a dear, good, honest girl; but, you see, she is all that remains to me, and I cannot help feeling alarmed when I hear of her jumping some tremendous big place."

I could quite sympathize with his anxiety; for, had not I myself experienced a curious stoppage of the heart when Nell had charged the timber?

"At least," I said, reassuringly, for seeing me in my present condition seemed somehow to have brought the dangers of hunting prominently before Mr. Austen's mind, "you have the satisfaction of knowing that Miss Fitzgerald is perfectly mounted. A great deal depends upon that; and the roan is a real clipper."

"Yes, he's a good little beast," said Mr. Austen. "I think Nell is tolerably safe with him; and, what's more, they suit each other."

"Admirably. May I ask where you got him?"

"I bred him myself, and only wish I could breed half-a-dozen more of the same stamp; but it's not to be done. Good horses are exceedingly difficult to rear."

"Indeed they are," said I. "And even in Ireland they have become almost as scarce as they are here."

"That is quite true; and our Government makes a great mistake in allowing so many valuable horses to go out of the country. Germany and America are gradually buying up our best blood. Already several choice strains are almost extinct."

"You and my father would agree, Mr. Austen. He always says precisely the same thing."

"Indeed! Do you know I have a sort of an idea that your father and I are old acquaintances. Was he not at Cambridge?"

"Yes, he went there in the year 1845."

"Ah! I thought so. Dear me! I remember Ned Mannington quite well. And so you are his son? Now I come to look at you, I see a decided likeness." And Mr. Austen peered kindly into my face.

"My father would not feel flattered if he thought I resembled him."

"Wouldn't he? He was very fond of sport, I recollect. You take after him there, at any rate."

"The Manningtons," returned I, with a touch of pride, "are all, both male and female, notorious for their love of horseflesh. You see, Mr. Austen, they are not celebrated for their brains, so they must go in for something."

He gave a quiet laugh, that had a kindly yet sceptical ring in it.

"Come, come," he said, "you underrate your abilities. My belief is, that half you young fellows now-a-days don't a bit know whether you have got any brains or not. Life is made too easy for you by half. You sail smoothly down it, instead of learning to steer through the rocks and rapids."

"In some cases, no doubt, but not in all. A poor man, for instance, does not lie on a bed of roses."

"And why should strong young men *expect* to lie on beds of roses?"

"Ah, that is a different question altogether; but, as a rule, their expectations are very much the result of their education."

"Too much money, too many comforts, and too great ease, ruin them," said Mr. Austen decidedly. "They make them selfish, idle, lazy, if not positively vicious. Men want *work*, to bring their faculties into play—just as a raw young yearling requires handling, before he learns how to carry himself. The molecules of the brain, like the muscles, need training, otherwise they are apt to degenerate."

"I agree with you in much that you say," said I, "but what is to be done, where fathers are rich and wish their sons to enjoy the same advantages that they themselves possess? The young man then begins where the old one leaves off, and sees no occasion to make his way."

"Yes, and ends in going to the bad altogether. But, as you say, the problem is a difficult one, and I suppose events alone will solve it. I still contend, however, that the minds of half the young fellows one meets now-a-days are like so much waste land that has never been reclaimed. If only put under cultivation, it is quite possible that in many cases the virgin soil would yield magnificent crops."

I began to take a keen pleasure in the conversation. Mr. Austen was evidently a man far above the average, of original ideas and shrewd intellect.

"Let us hope that it may prove so in my case," I said, with a laugh; "though, alas! there are no signs of a rich harvest at present."

"So you assert, and yet you read a book like this?" And Mr. Austen took up a copy of Herbert Spencer's "First Principles," which in Dicky's absence I had brought down, thinking to indulge in a quiet hour or two's reading.

"Truth compels me to make the humiliating confession that I am a deception. So far I have scarcely read a word, and the probabilities are, even if I tried, should understand but very little. High philosophy is difficult of comprehension."

"Very likely; with a head the size of a pumpkin, and your whole frame smarting from physical pain. It is well-nigh impossible under such circumstances to collect one's thoughts. But, at least, you had the intention of reading this book?"

"Well, yes; I had the intention."

"Exactly, and I maintain that any young man of your years, who even has the *wish* to study Herbert Spencer, in his spare moments, cannot be wholly devoid of brains, and consequently ideas."

"You give me credit for more than I possess."

"No, only for more than you perhaps are conscious of. Some day a crisis will come in your life which will develop them. I judge people a great deal by the shape of their heads, and you have a good open forehead."

After this manner did we converse so pleasantly and cordially on either side, that our surprise was mutual when the merry bells once more announced Nell's arrival. Mr. Austen took up his hat to depart.

"I declare," he said, "I had no idea I had been here so long. It only shows how well you have entertained me."

"The entertainment has been quite mutual," I replied.

"Well, good-bye," said Mr. Austen, giving me a hearty shake of the hand. "I must not keep Nell waiting,

and be sure and come on Saturday. I shall expect you at eight sharp."

"Allow me to see you to your carriage," I said politely.

"No, no, my dear fellow. Certainly not. I would not think of such a thing." And Mr. Austen made as if to waive me off.

But I insisted, and limped downstairs after him, with all the alacrity of which I was capable. For was not Nell below? and I wanted to be introduced to her. And I had my reward, for as I stood bare-headed on the pavement, Mr. Austen said:

"Nell, dear, here is Captain Mannington," and then she turned her charming face towards me, and for one instant her clear eyes looked straight into mine. A thrill went through all my frame.

"Pray do not stand out in the cold," she said courteously. "I have just met Captain Hooper riding home, and he has been telling me about your fall and saying what a bad one it was. You really should take a little more care of yourself."

They were ordinary enough words, but they did not sound ordinary in my ears. On the contrary they seemed to me to contain a kindly touch of feminine solicitude, which lent them a special charm. She reminded me of my mother, and of the days when a sweet woman's love had been mine. Her fur rug had slipped down and fallen to her feet. The groom was standing close by, but I picked it up, and carefully wrapped it round her, saying at the same time: "If it is cold for me, it is doubly so for you."

She smiled her thanks, and I thought to myself that they could not have been more prettily conveyed, for when she smiled her whole face softened in the most captivating manner.

"Uncle," she said gaily, "Captain Mannington is quite incorrigible, and will not listen to reason. We must reserve our sermons on health till Saturday evening. In the meantime the truest service we can do him is to drive off at once, for if he

stands here any longer he will catch his death of cold."

"Will you receive me at dinner in this state?" I said laughingly, raising my hand to my injured eye.

"In any state," she replied, giving a flick to the ponies, "if only you will be sensible and go indoors."

I turned away and waved my adieux from the hall. Then when Nell was fairly out of sight I went upstairs and did a very foolish thing. I again looked at myself in the glass, and the upshot of my prolonged and impartial scrutiny was this:

"Miles Mannington! Miles Mannington! What a fool you are to let her see you at present. You are ugly enough by nature, but now you are ten thousand times uglier than ever." And thus thinking my heart sank. But had I known the kindly and compassionate nature of the girl, I need not have felt so depressed. The sight of a fellow creature's injuries inspired nothing but pity, not disgust or repugnance, as I fancied.

CHAPTER XII

A SIX-DAYS-A-WEEK MAN'S WIFE.

TEN minutes later Dicky came in.

His surprise was extreme on learning who my visitor had been.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed regretfully. "If I had only known that the old chap was here I should have come home half-an-hour sooner. Things did not improve after you left. We did next to nothing, and it turned out a beastly cold afternoon."

"You can console yourself for my having stolen a march upon you," I replied, with a feeling of malicious pleasure that I could not wholly suppress.

"How so?" enquired Dicky.

"Because you will very shortly have an opportunity

of making Mr. Austen's acquaintance. He has asked us both to dine at Cattington Towers on Saturday night."

"Come, that's a good deal better, and it looks as if they mean to be friendly."

"I am quite sure they mean to be friendly."

"Really? How do you know, Miles?"

"From their manner. You can always tell if people are inclined to be stuck up and give themselves airs. They make you have a frigid sensation."

"When you say 'they,'" returned Dicky quickly, "do you intend me to infer that you have seen Miss Fitzgerald?"

"Dear me!" I ejaculated, looking the very personification of innocence. "Did you not know? How strange! I thought I had told you."

"No," said Dicky, impatiently; "you told me nothing. You are so awfully close."

I laughed. I felt that for the present, at any rate, I was on vantage ground.

"My dear Dicky," I said, coolly, "you really are most amusing. An agreeable old gentleman is good enough to pay me half-an-hour's visit, and you promptly imagine that at the end of it, I must necessarily have become the recipient of a whole budget of news. Allow me to undeceive you, and to assure you once for all that such is not the case."

And I smiled blandly.

"How provoking you are, Miles. You know quite well what I mean. Were you, or were you not introduced to Miss F.?"

"Since you put it in that categorical way—yes, I was."

"And talked to her?"

"I did. Not, perhaps, in the sprightly and original manner for which you are conspicuous, but as volubly as my natural shyness would permit of."

"Well, and what was she like?"

Knowing, as I did, Dicky's designs, his ardent interest in Miss Fitzgerald disgusted me so much, that I took

a deliberate pleasure in teasing him; besides which, I was extremely anxious not to let him guess at my real sentiments.

"What was she like?" I repeated. "Ahem! to tell you the truth I hardly know. It is difficult to judge of a person's character when you only exchange half-a-dozen words or so with each other."

"Pooh! Nonsense! I was not talking about character," interrupted Dicky.

"As far as I could tell," continued I, calmly, "Miss Fitzgerald appeared to possess two eyes, a nose and a mouth, much the same as other young women. She is not a monstrosity, of that I can assure you."

"Miles, you are enough to make a saint swear."

"I am grieved to learn that saints indulge in such a naughty habit."

"Worse and worse!" cried Dicky, irritably. "Can't you tell me straight out if Miss F. seemed a jolly sort of girl or not?"

"No; because our definitions of the word 'jolly' would probably vary. Miss Fitzgerald seemed cold, which was not wonderful, taking the state of the atmosphere into account. Judging from my own feelings, I believe the thermometer cannot be far off the freezing point."

"I see that you are determined to tell me nothing," said Dicky, sulkily.

"For the best of all reasons, because I have nothing to tell. Would you have me fabricate a tissue of stories for your special edification?"

Dicky looked hard at me to see if I was in earnest. Then apparently convinced that I was concealing no state secret, he drew a long breath as if of relief, and exclaimed:

"Well, Miles, all I can say is this: You are a most infernal duffer!"

"Thanks, old man. You are exceedingly complimentary. Do you imagine, however, that you are imparting a novel piece of intelligence?"

"What I mean to say," returned Dicky emphatically,

"is that you have not the very least idea of taking advantage of your opportunities. You really don't deserve to have any."

"Don't I? Take comfort then in the thought that I don't meet with many, more particularly when Lieutenant Richard Dawson is present."

"Now if I had been in your shoes this afternoon," continued Dicky in all good faith, "I should have made friends with Miss Fitzgerald in no time. The foundation stone would have been laid at any rate."

"Very likely; but then you see I labour under the great, the crushing misfortune of not being you." And I fixed my eyes on Dicky's handsome person.

"Girls don't like a bashful man," quoth he in return, getting up from his seat, and warming his back before the fire. "What they admire now-a-days is plenty of dash."

"In other words, plenty of impudence."

"It does not much signify what term you choose to employ. The fact remains the same. No woman born can stand a timid wooer."

"I cannot pretend to your experience," I said, with a slight sneer; "but, to my way of thinking, no nice one would brook a too forward suitor. A man who permits himself to take liberties with women has no real respect for the sex, and consequently is incapable of true love. Ten to one but what he proves false and fickle."

"Upon my word, Miles, what an odd chap you are to be sure. You are almost as romantic as a girl in her teens, and it is quite extraordinary in these days to come across a man who holds such curious, old-fashioned ideas about women and all that sort of thing. You might be a whole century behind the modern school."

"I am glad to hear it. You may think me a Goth, but the modern school of which you speak does not inspire me with unqualified admiration. Its followers show a sad want of reverence, chivalry, and real gentlemanly feeling. However, we need not discuss

that point, else we shall drift into the old argument again."

"Heaven preserve us!" exclaimed Dicky in mock terror.

"Very well then, go upstairs and get off your hunting kit, and when you come down we will ring the bell and indulge in the luxury of a cup of afternoon tea. I don't know how you feel, but I am most awfully thirsty."

Dicky looked at my parched lips and burning cheeks.

"Poor old man," he said in tones of commiseration.

"You are a bit feverish certainly, and I am sadly afraid won't feel up to hunting to-morrow."

"Pooh! Don't talk rubbish," I replied indignantly.

But although I scouted the mere notion of being forced to stay at home on account of my injuries, when the morrow came Dicky's words proved right. I was so terribly stiff and sore, and the slightest movement was attended with so much pain, that after getting dressed and even having my horse saddled, I was obliged to give up all idea of going out hunting, for that day at least. It was dreadfully provoking; but it could not be helped, since I really did not feel well enough to ride.

Dicky kindly volunteered to keep me company, but I should have been a perfect heathen to accept his offer, and I naturally refused it. At the same time, I was none the less grateful to him for making it.

Nevertheless, I felt rather like a bear with a sore head when I saw him depart, and went back alone to our little sitting-room, which in the cold morning light of a dull wintry day looked many degrees less cheerful than on the previous afternoon.

However, I managed to while away the morning somehow, and by the time I had eaten a biscuit or two, and drank a glass of sherry, I resigned myself to the inevitable and began to take a less melancholy view of the situation. By-and-by, the sun came out, and shone quite dazzlingly on the big window-panes of the houses opposite.

A sparrow commenced to chirp, flew down from the roof on the road below, and pecked about in search of food, and the sky suddenly changed from a leaden grey to a soft, beautiful, dreamy blue, flecked with thin clouds of airy white.

Altogether it looked so fine and tempting, that I resolved to go out, and try if I could walk off my stiffness. The fresh air, I was persuaded, would do me good; besides, one wearied of being shut up in a small room, without any company whatsoever, though I could fancy the time passing pleasantly enough, if Nell occupied the arm-chair opposite mine, and—but there! I *would* not allow myself to indulge in such foolish dreams, else the habit might become inveterate.

My first visit was naturally to the stables, where I found The Siren standing in her box, with bandaged legs, but apparently not much the worse for her adventures of the previous day. She had escaped better than I.

To my astonishment, Martingale gave an unexpectedly good account of the mare's condition, and she appeared to have risen slightly in his esteem. The cause was not difficult to find.

"I really do believe," said he, "that hunting agrees with her constitootshun; for she fed better last night than she has done since she has been here."

I expressed my satisfaction and enquired after the over-reach.

"Going on first-class, Captin," answered Martingale. "She'll be round by Tuesday or Wednesday, at the latest."

"Come; that's good news. And Golden Drop, how is he?" And I moved on to the chestnut's box.

"Pretty nearly sound, sir,—beg pardon, Captin I should say. I was a-thinking he'd do to come out Monday, if so be as how you were able to ride."

"Ride? Of course I shall. Cart ropes would not keep me in longer than to-day."

"Very well, Captin, you know best. There's Obadiah, you could take him out to-morrow. He is

fresh and hearty, and would do nicely for you to potter about on, if you did not feel quite up to the mark."

"Yes; that's a good idea. I'll ride him first, and see how I get on."

This weighty matter being settled, after some further desultory conversation with Martingale, who I was pleased to find improved on acquaintance, I started for a stroll through the town. It wanted twenty-five minutes to three, and I had still a longish afternoon before me. Having soon exhausted the sights of Whinboro' I directed my footsteps in the direction of Captain Hooper's house. Curiosity prompted me to ascertain what the abode of my hard-riding friend was like, and as we were to lunch there on Sunday it was just as well to know the way beforehand.

But the road which led to The Lodge was rather steep—in my present limp condition I found it exceedingly so, and after proceeding slowly for about half a mile, I was not sorry to find the house within view. It was of medium size and built of red brick. It stood in the centre of a large grass field, and was approached by a short gravel drive. Several brood mares and young horses were grazing in this field, and in the one adjoining; but I could perceive no garden of any sort, and the place appeared somewhat bare and dreary, being utterly devoid of trees.

As I had no intention of going in, I stood for a few moments, resting on my stick and gazing at the country around, when suddenly I heard a brisk voice behind me say:

"How do you do? Were you going to pay my husband a visit? If so I am sorry he is not at home."

I turned, and saw a neat, bright, intelligent-looking little woman of about eight-and-twenty. She was smart and spruce, and smiling, and seemed absolutely at her ease in thus addressing a complete stranger.

"I am Mrs. Hooper," she explained, seeing me at a loss for an immediate answer, "and I presume you are one of the gentlemen on whom I called yesterday. Harry told me to leave his cards, so after that it is

not a bit of good our standing on ceremony. I hate ceremony, don't you?"

"Indeed I do," I responded heartily. And certainly there seemed little of it about Mrs. Hooper. She was perfectly unaffected and free from constraint, yet, at the same time, neither vulgar nor unfeminine. She gave one the impression of being a bright, cheery person, who did not know the meaning of the word Pessimism. Such people possess the gift of illumining the more sombre paths of their less happily constituted neighbours.

I raised my hat and bowed.

"I met your husband out hunting yesterday," I replied, "and he was good enough to ask me and my friend, Mr. Dawson, to lunch with him on Sunday."

"Did he? Well, that *was* stupid of Harry. He knows quite well that we have promised to stay at Cattington Towers from Saturday till Monday. Really, Harry's memory grows worse and worse." And the little woman looked quite distressed.

"Never mind," I said, "any other day will suit just as well, and if you are going to Cattington Towers we shall at any rate have the pleasure of meeting you there, since Mr. Austen has kindly asked us to dinner on Saturday evening."

"Ah! you have made his acquaintance, then. Do you not find him an extremely charming old gentleman?"

"Yes, he struck me as being one of the most agreeable men I ever met."

"And Nell," continued Mrs. Hooper, in an animated voice; "you know her. Is she not a dear?"

This point-blank question was very confusing. I coloured and drew into my shell, like a snail that has been sharply touched by some rude hand.

"I have merely been introduced to Miss Fitzgerald," I replied stiffly, "and am not qualified to express my opinion."

"Dear me; how cautious you are. I believe everybody forms impressions at first sight. One

knows at once whether one likes or dislikes a person."

"That may be, only sometimes it becomes necessary to modify one's ideas. But," I added hastily, for we were getting on to dangerous ground, "I am keeping you standing, Mrs. Hooper, and I must not do that. Which way were you going?"

"I was going home. Will you not come in and pay me a visit? Now confess that when I met you, you did not know what on earth to do with yourself."

I smiled.

"Mrs. Hooper," I said, "you possess great powers of penetration."

"No, not of penetration, but perhaps of sympathy. I can quite feel for you in your present position. It is dull for any one to be much alone."

"Have you experienced that?" I asked.

"I can't help it," she said penitently. "You see, Harry is always out hunting, and I am only too thankful when any good Samaritan will take compassion on my solitude."

She said the words very simply; not like one who states a grievance, but rather as if she were ashamed of confessing her sentiments. And I felt sorry for her.

It is not all sunshine for a woman who marries a six-days-a-week man, however good a fellow he may be, when he leaves her the live-long day to amuse herself as best she can, and his whole thoughts are centred in horses and hounds.

He comes back tired, speaks little, eats a good dinner, goes to sleep and snores in an arm-chair, then retires to bed. The wife does not trouble him much. His affections are of a placid order, and so long as *he* is content he imagines *she* ought to be so also. He cannot realize the long, weary hours, the silent house, the solitary lunch, and total want of companionship, which to an active-minded, intelligent woman, naturally fond of society, must prove dreary and monotonous in the extreme.

"Do you not hunt yourself?" I asked, in tones of compassion, as all this shot through my mind, and we walked towards the house.

A shadow passed over her lively features.

"No," she said, in a subdued voice.

"I suppose you don't care for it?" I said interrogatively.

"Yes, I do; I care for it more than for anything almost, but," and she broke off suddenly.

Then she gave her head a little proud toss, and resumed in her usual tone:

"After all, there is no reason why I should not tell you the truth. It is a mean thing to feel ashamed of one's position. The fact is, about two years ago, Harry lost the greater part of his fortune in some wretched bank that went smash, and he could not afford to go on hunting, as a gentleman, so he took to horse dealing; do you understand?"

I nodded my head.

"There is generally a prejudice against people in our position adopting such a profession as a means of livelihood," went on Mrs. Hooper, frankly, "but Harry is very clever where horses are concerned, and besides," and a tender look stole into her bright eyes, "he is a popular man. We go on the principle that honesty is the best policy, and we have been fortunate enough to do very well. Harry not only gets his sport for nothing, but turns an honest penny."

"I am glad to hear it," said I heartily, "if only for his wife's sake."

Mrs. Hooper laughed. The best woman alive is not insensible to an implied compliment.

"You give me credit for being better than I am," she said simply; "but you see now how it is that Harry cannot afford to mount me as well as himself. Dear old boy! He will give me a horse as soon as ever he can find the money, but until I am able to have one of my very own, which will not require to be sold at the yearly sale, he thinks it wiser, and so do I, for me to give up hunting. He has a horror of my being

mixed up in the horse-dealing business, and though he has no pride for himself, it is nice of him to have some where his wife is concerned; don't you think so?"

And she looked into my face appealingly.

I said, "Yes." For now that I learnt her husband hunted from necessity, not entirely from choice, it altered my views considerably.

"What horse was that he rode yesterday?" I enquired.

"Do you mean dear old Jumping Jim? That is the one horse Harry vows he never will part with. He saved his life once, by swimming across some wide river, and Harry declared he would keep him all his days."

She was a good little soul, this Mrs. Hooper, and her affection for "Harry" was truly beautiful. It set me thinking what a lucky fellow he was to have inspired it.

"And do you often feel dull?" I asked. By this time we had entered the house, and had seated ourselves in the small, prettily furnished drawing-room.

"Now and again," she replied truthfully. "It is difficult to be cheerful always. Still I ought not to complain. People are very good to me, and, as a rule, Harry does not stay out late. Then there is Nellie Fitzgerald."

"Do you see much of her?"

"Yes; we meet nearly every day. She and I are tremendous friends. Two years ago, when all our money misfortunes occurred, Nell was in great trouble too, and we got to know each other very intimately. Poor little Nell!" And a sudden moisture twinkled in Mrs. Hooper's dark eyes, which endeared her to me there and then. "I would give a great deal to see her happy."

"Is she not happy?" I said, in a trembling voice.

"No; I am afraid not."

A pause ensued.

There was a velvet cover on the table near which I

was seated. It had a worsted fringe. I began nervously twisting and untwisting the ends with my great clumsy fingers.

"Was there—not—some unfortunate love affair?" I said at last.

Mrs. Hooper looked at me sharply.

"Ah! you have heard of it then?"

"I have heard rumours to that effect."

"Nellie has changed very much since then," said Mrs. Hooper, as if speaking more to herself than to me.

"Poor little girl!" I murmured under my breath.

"Before that," continued my companion, "she was like a young kitten, so full of life and spirits; now she is a woman, and one moreover who entertains a profound disbelief of man. It is quite sad to see a mere girl so thoroughly disillusioned."

"I suppose some brute of a fellow treated her badly Eh?"

I was afraid Mrs. Hooper might think the question impertinent, but she answered frankly:

"Not only badly, but cruelly, infamously. It has been a sad story from first to last, and nobody knows what that poor girl has suffered in consequence."

I cannot tell what sudden impulse seized me, but my blood seemed literally on fire.

I got up from my seat and crossed the room to where Mrs. Hooper was sitting.

"Mrs. Hooper," I said; "will you tell me Miss Fitzgerald's history? But, perhaps, I have no right to ask, if so, pray forgive me."

She seemed surprised at the request, and turned her bright, piercing eyes full upon mine. As she gazed at me, their expression gradually softened. I felt somehow that I was on probation, but I did not flinch from her glance.

Then, after a pause, which seemed to me never ending, though it could only have lasted a few seconds, she said:

"Yes, I will. For Nell's sake I do not often speak of the Past; but you have an honest face, that inspires

me with confidence, and, rightly or wrongly, I will trust you with my friend's story."

I pressed her hand in mine.

"Thank you," I said seriously; "I promise never to abuse your trust, and you are very good to accede to my request."

So saying, I took a chair, seated myself close to Mrs. Hooper's side, and leaned forward in an attitude of expectation.

CHAPTER XIII.

NELL'S FIRST LOVE AFFAIR.

MRS. HOOPER cleared her throat, and without further preliminary began.

"You have probably heard," she said, "that Nell is a great heiress. Two years ago, when she was eighteen—a mere child in point of years—there came to Whinboro' a young man named De Courcy. Nobody knew anything of him, but he was good-looking, gentlemanly and agreeable, and appeared to have money at his command. Consequently, before long, he was received by most of the county people, and amongst others he made the acquaintance of our friends at Cattington Towers. Mr. De Courcy gave himself out as being of French-Canadian extraction. He stated he was an orphan, and that his guardian had advised him to come to England, in order to see the country and become acquainted with its national sports. Therefore he had determined to take up his abode at Whinboro' for the winter. He owned four or five good horses, seemed fairly well off, and nobody doubted his word.

"From the first moment he set eyes on Nellie Fitzgerald, he paid her the most marked attention. One would have said he had no thought for anybody else. Nell is not a girl to succumb through gratified vanity alone, and at first she appeared more or less indifferent

to De Courcy ; but they met constantly in the hunting-field, and elsewhere, and by degrees the curious fascination of the man's manner wrought its charm upon her, and she ended by falling desperately in love with him. Their attachment seemed mutual. De Courcy proposed and was accepted ; Mr. Austen disapproved of the match. For some reason or other he had never liked the young man, and he sought to make inquiries respecting him. These inquiries, I believe, were not attended with any result. De Courcy was poor. His entire fortune consisted of some six hundred a year. Nell, however, declared that she was rich enough for both of them, and eventually overruled her uncle's objections. They were publicly engaged, and all Whinboro' knew that Reginald De Courcy was to marry the wealthy heiress, Nellie Fitzgerald. At length the wedding day was fixed."

Mrs. Hooper remained silent for a second or two, as if recalling the events that had occurred, then resumed :

"One afternoon, exactly a fortnight before the marriage was to have taken place, Nell sent a line asking me to go over to the Towers and inspect her presents. I did so, and she and I were alone, looking at a case of very handsome jewellery, received from her uncle the day before, when a servant came into the room and said there was a young woman down below who insisted on seeing Miss Fitzgerald.

" 'Show her up,' said Nell gaily. 'You don't mind, do you, dear?' turning to me. 'No doubt it is one of Madame Lupin's girls, come from Littlehampton to try on my travelling dress.'

"So the stranger was ushered into Nell's boudoir.

"She proved to be a tall, handsome young woman, with blue eyes and jet black hair, that contrasted well with her pale, creamy complexion. She was neatly dressed in black, and looked very nearly, though not quite a lady. There was just an indefinable something wanting. Her age might have been two or three and twenty, but it was difficult to tell exactly, since her countenance was prematurely lined and careworn, like

one who, though she had not lived long, had suffered much. In her arms she carried a child of a few months old, and by her side toddled a little girl of two or three. She stood at the threshold of the door, and looked with great hollow eyes, first at Nell and then at me, and said in a low voice:

"Which of you two ladies is Miss Fitzgerald?"

"I am," answered Nell, rising from her chair, a little startled by the solemnity of her visitor's manner.

"The other clutched her by the hand, and gazed into Nell's face. Then she loosed her hold and said despairingly:

"Yes, you are pretty; much prettier and younger than I am. I might have known how it would be;" and she forced back a sob.

"There was something so sad and touching in the way she said these words, that Nell, I could see, felt sorry for her.

"Is there anything I can do to help you?" she said kindly. "You seem in great trouble."

"No, you can do nothing; nobody can help me," replied the stranger, and as she spoke the tears trickled down her pale cheeks. She wiped them hastily away, then with an effort said: "But I did not come here to talk of myself. It is you who, if possible, I wish to save."

"Me?" exclaimed Nell in surprise.

"Yes, you. Are you not going to be married to Reginald De Courcy?"

"I am. Our wedding takes place on this day fortnight."

"Thank God!" exclaimed the young woman, clasping her hands together with a gesture of relief. "There is still time to prevent it."

"Prevent it, woman! What do you mean?"

"I have travelled many weary miles; I have known no rest by day or by night; I have sought your address for weeks until at last an accident revealed it to me, and now I have come to save you from marrying a very bad, wicked man."

"'Bad! Wicked!' cried Nell indignantly, flushing up to the roots of her hair in defence of De Courcy.

How *dare* you say such a thing to me? You do not even know the gentleman of whom you speak in these abusive terms.'

"The other gave a bitter laugh of mingled scorn and pain. It struck terror into my heart, for I seemed to know by instinct what was coming.

"'Don't I?' she said fiercely. 'I who am as good as married to him, and in the sight of God am his real wife. True, I have no legal claim upon him, I cannot force him to do me justice, and knowing all, you can still take him for your husband if you choose. Such things happen every day in this wicked world. We poor women are cast aside by the men who have deceived us with their fair words and false promises; but if you marry Reginald De Courcy you shall not do so with your eyes shut. Why,' and she pointed to the two children, 'these poor innocents are *his*; he is their father. What greater proof do you desire than that?'

"Nell turned deadly pale and trembled in every limb. Even now she tried to be loyal to her love, and refused to believe a word against him.

"'It is false,' she cried hoarsely, lifting up both her hands as if to ward off a bitter blow. 'You are only saying these terrible things to try me.'

"'It is *not* false,' returned the stranger, in calm, emphatic tones, whose quiet carried greater conviction than the stormiest denial. 'I wish to God it were. Listen. Reginald De Courcy, for all his good looks, smooth tongue and fascinating manners, is a liar, a scoundrel, and a base, dishonourable man, there!' Then her voice dropped almost to a whisper, and a weary, weary look stole into her handsome young face. 'But I love him in spite of it all,' she moaned. 'I love him still, and would forgive him everything if only he would come back to me again.'

"Nell caught at the words, as a drowning man catches at a straw.

"'Aha!' she said angrily. 'You love him, do you? and you are jealous, and so you come here and try to take him away from me by inventing wicked stories. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.'

"The other bore her reproof meekly.

"'Poor thing,' she muttered. 'Poor thing, I am sorry for you.'

"'But you cannot take my Reginald from me,' continued Nell defiantly, emboldened by her visitor's meekness. 'You cannot do it. He loves me too well, and I love him better than anything on this earth. Go away, you bad woman. This is no place for you.' And beside herself, she strove to push the stranger out at the door. I had never seen Nell so fierce, and I realized for the first time how deeply she cared for this man.

"The young woman did not lose her self-possession. Her face turned a shade paler, as she listened to Nell's wild words, and her under-lip quivered a little, but she merely put her hand into her pocket and drew out a letter.

"Both Nell and I immediately recognized De Courcy's handwriting. It was a very peculiar one, large and bold and round.

"'Miss Fitzgerald,' she said, with a quiet dignity that subdued us both, 'you have called me a bad woman, and perhaps you may be right. If it is bad to love a man to distraction, to be misled by his promises into making one lapse from virtue, which destroys your self-respect, embitters your days, and lowers your womanhood, then I am, as you say, a very bad and wicked woman; but I am not so bad as to willingly give you pain. I have suffered too much myself to wish, needlessly, to inflict it upon others. I hoped you would have believed my word, and that, at all events, the sight of the children would have convinced you; but since this appears insufficient, it is better for both our sakes—for yours and for mine—that you should read this letter, written by your lover. You will then see Reginald De Courcy in his true light.'

"There was something so terribly impressive about her manner of saying these words, that it carried conviction to my heart. I felt myself shiver. As for Nell, she had not courage to read the fatal letter, which she seemed to recognize would prove a death-blow to all her hopes. She signed to me to do so. The contents were as follows—they will always remain branded on my memory:

"DEAREST LOTTY,—I have received your two last letters, and admit that I have been some time in answering them; but I have a piece of news to tell you, which will account for my silence. You must not be surprised at it; and I hope you will behave like a good, sensible girl, and wish me joy. You write asking for money; but, as you very well know, I have none to give. It is as much as I can do to rub along myself. But very soon I hope to be in a position to maintain you and the children more comfortably. The fact is, I am going to be married. Now don't howl and cry your eyes out. The water-work business only annoys me. The young lady is one Miss Fitzgerald, a great heiress. She is a good little thing in her way, and very fond of me. But you need not feel jealous; for, though she will be my wife, you will always have my heart; and after a bit we shall be able to meet again as usual. Until then, dearest Lotty,

"Believe me, yours ever,

"REGINALD DE COURCY."

"That letter revealed the whole character of the man; the cold, heartless libertinism, the egotism, and revolting mercenariness. He was evidently loyal neither to the old love nor to the new. When I finished reading, Nell gave one piteous cry, like a creature that has been wounded to the death, and fell fainting on the floor.

"Lotty rushed to her assistance. I turned indignantly upon her.

"Leave us to our misery,' I said roughly. 'It is

you who have brought Miss Fitzgerald to this pass. You had no business to tell her such a tale of wrong and shame.'

"The next minute I was sorry for having spoken so unkindly; but, in moments of sudden passion, it is impossible to choose one's words. The tears were standing in Lotty's eyes, and rolling down her thin, pale cheeks.

"'What could I do?' she said, humbly. 'It would have been wicked to let her marry him. She was young and pure and innocent; and he would only have made her miserable. Besides,' she went on, huskily, 'I—surely, I—and the children had the greatest claim upon him. You forget that we came first.'

"My heart bled for the poor humiliated woman, stripped of all her illusions, robbed of her happiness, shorn of her self-respect and social standing, with nothing save the shattered remnants of a great undying love left behind. Sad as was Nell's position, hers was infinitely sadder. I bowed my head like one rebuked.

"'Forgive me,' I said. 'You are in the right, and have behaved nobly in coming here; but, nevertheless, it is better now that you should go. Leave me the letter, so that I may show it to Mr. Austen. The engagement must be broken off immediately. There is not a minute to lose.'

"Ah! you did right there," I interrupted eagerly, breaking in upon Mrs. Hooper's story.

Hitherto I had listened to it in silence, but with a rising lump in my throat. Now I could contain myself no longer.

"The d——d scoundrel," I hissed through my set teeth. "I would give half a year's income to horse-whip him as he deserves."

Mrs. Hooper smiled approval.

"I am glad to hear you say that," she said, "for it shows at any rate that all men are not alike, and that there are a few good ones about."

"Alike! Thank goodness, no! But what of Nell—

MISS Fitzgerald, I mean? How did she bear the blow? No wonder her face has that sad look when in repose."

"Very patiently, poor dear; but she had loved De Courcy well and truly, and she has never quite recovered from his treachery.

"It was only my money he wanted, Fanny,' she said piteously, about six weeks later. 'He pretended to care for me so much; but he did not a bit, really. He told me he would always be honest and true, that no other woman could ever be the same to him, and I—I was a little fool, and believed what he said. Fanny,' and she looked up into my face with tearful eyes, 'are all girls as silly as I have been?'

"You have not been silly, my darling. Don't say such a thing.'

"And are *all* men so bad? Oh! Fanny, I did not think they could be so wicked. I shall *never*, NEVER, NEVER trust one again! Whenever they make pretty speeches to me in future, I shall say to myself: 'Yes, that's all very fine; but you are telling me stories. You just make up to me because I have money, and would say exactly the same things to the next woman you meet.' Shakespeare was right when he made the forsaken Julia say: 'Man were perfect, were he but constant.' I don't believe there is a constant man on the face of this earth.'

"You may imagine," said Mrs. Hooper, "that it was terrible to me to hear poor Nell talk like this, and yet all the time I could not help feeling it to be only natural. She has had dozens of proposals since the De Courcy affair, but nothing will induce her to listen to any of them. If you ask her why, she says she cannot bear men."

"Poor little girl!" I exclaimed sympathetically. "I can quite understand her dislike."

"You see, the shock was so great," went on my companion. "Nell was as innocent as a child. She had no idea of what took place in the world. She believed everybody was good and pure like herself, and then all at once, vast undreamt-of depths of iniquity seemed

suddenly opened out, whilst the knowledge that such things existed, literally appalled her youthful spirit. That is where you men have cause to congratulate yourselves. In nine cases out of ten you marry ignorant young girls who believe in you, and who really imagine that when they surrender their youthful affections, their lover loves them in return as they do him. But when a few years have passed over their heads, and they learn what poor old, battered, worn-out hearts are offered in exchange for their fresh ones, then they do not enter quite so readily into the matrimonial bargain. They see that one side gives all, the other very little, and they are not so easily caught by a few pretty speeches, which have been poured forth into the ears of dozens of other women. We learn our experience in process of time; but it comes hardly to most of us, and Nell is no exception to the rule. I question much now whether she will ever marry. She has conceived such an inveterate dislike to the male sex. She talks to them, and fulfils all the obligations of society, but as she often says, men are no more to her now than so many wooden blocks."

"I don't wonder at it," I said. "If anybody had treated me as that scoundrel De Courcy treated Miss Fitzgerald, I should feel precisely the same. People should leave her alone, and not worry her with their attentions for a time, until at all events she recovers a little more from the shock she has undergone. Girls are very tender things, and I often think we men do not half understand them properly."

Mrs. Hooper looked at me in astonishment.

"What!" she exclaimed. "Do you not contradict me when I abuse your sex, or like all the other men I have met attempt to defend your own species? Truly you surprise me, and *for a man* appear unusually generous."

"Not generous, only just. I grieve at the great suffering and woe we so often inflict, and I thank you, Mrs. Hooper, for telling me this story. I trust that it may help to make me more tender and considerate to

women in the future. They have a great deal to bear and to suffer in this world, and the strong are not nearly kind enough to them."

The tears sprang into Mrs. Hooper's eyes. She took my hand in hers, and pressed it warmly.

"You are a good fellow," she said. "A real good fellow, and I wish—I wish——" breaking off short.

"Well!" I enquired with a smile. "What is it that you wish?"

"That Nell might get to know you as you deserve to be known. It would do her more good than anything."

I blushed scarlet.

"No, no," I stammered hurriedly. "You—you forget that I am a poor man. I would not marry a girl for her money if it were ever so——"

Mrs. Hooper interrupted me.

"I did not mean that," she said eagerly. "I meant if you were to fall in lo— well, never mind, what I meant. I hardly know myself. Only before you go, promise me one thing."

"Willingly," I replied.

"Don't let Nell know that I have told you her history. Of course the people about here are all aware of it, and sooner or later you would have heard the matter talked of, but she might not like my speaking of her troubles to a comparative stranger. Only somehow you don't seem a bit like a stranger to me."

"Don't be afraid," I said earnestly. "I will never willingly, either by word or deed, do anything to annoy Miss Fitzgerald. She has suffered quite enough as it is, and I only wish it were in my power to lighten her pain."

And so saying I rose to wish Mrs. Hooper good-bye.

"We shall meet on Saturday," she said, "and although we cannot have the pleasure of seeing you here next Sunday, you must come again very soon."

I promised to do so.

Mrs. Hooper had been kind enough to call me a good fellow. I felt precisely the same sentiment towards her.

We had been *tête-à-tête* for over an hour, and during the whole of the time she had been perfectly open and honest and unceremonious.

She was one of those rare women, who, satisfied with her own husband, is content to be a man's friend and nothing more.

It is a pity such women do not exist in greater numbers, for there is something so genial, pleasant and restful in their society, that we of the sterner sex cannot choose but feel its subtle charm. We are in no danger of falling in love with our fair friends; indeed we recognize that their affections are otherwise engaged, but our respect and esteem is theirs, and they inspire sentiments that far prettier women do not succeed in giving birth to. They are in short "good fellows."

I left Mrs. Hooper's house, determining to revisit it on the earliest opportunity. I had learned much that I wished to know, and the knowledge filled me with a tender yearning.

I longed to take Nellie Fitzgerald in my arms and comfort the poor, dear, ill-used little soul to the best of my feeble ability.

In imagination my shyness had taken wings.

I pictured myself pouring loving words into her small pink ear, which should heal the aching heart that had been so cruelly wounded.

A man had inflicted the hurt, and it seemed to me a man's duty to try and cure it.

CHAPTER XIV.

DICKY MAKES THE RUNNING.

ON my return home I found Dicky, who had just come back from hunting, and who appeared in an extremely elated and self-satisfied condition.

"So sorry you weren't out, old chappie," he said to

me as I entered the room ; " we have had a ripping run of over an hour and three-quarters ; the first forty minutes at tip-top pace, and with scarcely a check."

" Indeed ! " I replied. " Did you kill your fox ? "

" Yes, we ran into him in the open. He was a splendid old fellow, with a white tag to his brush, and we never changed foxes all the way."

" How is it you are home so early ? "

" It is past four," said Dicky, looking at his watch. " But the fact was, the gees were pretty well cooked ; so we one-horse men were obliged to retire from the scene of action."

" And how did the mare carry you ? "

He had ridden the one whose purchase he regretted, but who from the first I rather fancied.

" Capitally. She could not have gone better if she had been accustomed to the Shires all her life. I retract my remark about her being under-sized ! She jumped first-class, and in fact covered herself with glory."

" In which honours you, I presume, participated ? " said I, with a smile.

An expression of complacency stole over Dicky's countenance.

" It don't do to boast of one's own performances, but to tell you the truth, Miles, I held a capital place throughout. Whichever way I turned, I seemed as if I could not go wrong. But if you want to hear all about the run, ask Miss Fitzgerald."

" Miss Fitzgerald ! Was she out ? "

" Very much so, and going like a bird—bang up in front from first to last. I wouldn't mind betting a pony that there are not half-a-dozen women in the kingdom who can beat her across a country."

" Did you see much of her then ? " I asked.

" As good luck would have it, a great deal," replied Dicky.

" How was that ? "

" Why, we happened to make an awfully lucky turn

which saved us nearly half a mile, just too when the horses were getting blown; but to do so we had to ride pretty straight, and negotiate three or four uncommonly nasty fences—not ones fit for a lady to jump, I mean.”

“And did Miss Fitzgerald follow you?” I asked, realizing something of Mr. Austen’s anxiety, when he wished Nell would go quietly to hounds.

“Yes, without turning a hair. I hardly know which to admire most, herself or the chestnut-roan. They are both rippers.” And Dicky sent a cloud of tobacco smoke flying into the air, and puffed energetically at his favourite old cherry-wood pipe.

“Then I am to understand that you had the distinguished honour of leading Miss Fitzgerald?” I said, not without a slight feeling of soreness at my own ill-luck, which had prevented me from having a similar chance.

“Well, yes,” replied Dicky, trying to look modest but failing signally in the attempt. “The young lady was good enough to select me for her pilot.”

“I hope you took care of her?”

“Of course. My dear Miles, do you take me for a bear?”

“You introduced yourself, I suppose?”

“Nothing of the sort,” said Dicky, triumphantly.

“She spoke to me first.”

“What did she say?”

I was aware of my curiosity, but could not check it.

“Something about our being in for a first-rate run, and she asked me not to hang at my fences because her horse was a bit of a rusher.”

“Were you hanging, Dicky? If so, that was very unlike your usual form.”

“Now, Miles, is it likely?” said he in an injured tone. “Miss Fitzgerald merely made the remark in case I might think she did not give me enough time at my fences. But she is far too good a horsewoman to knock a fellow down.”

“Altogether, you seem to have made an impression.”

Dicky chuckled softly over his pipe, and showed two rows of beautifully even teeth.

"I tell you what, Miles," he said, "she's a real nice girl, that."

"Oh, indeed! Have you only just made that magnificent discovery?"

"In fact," continued Dicky seriously, "she'll *do*."

"Do! For whom? For what? Explain yourself."

"Come shut up, Miles; none of your chaff."

"I'm not chaffing, my dear fellow," I said, feeling terribly grim.

"What I mean," went on Dicky reflectively, "is, that Miss F. is a good sort. She's jolly, nice looking, has no humbug about her, is fond of sport, and last, but not least, is the fortunate possessor of lots of coin. Under these circumstances, I can pass her."

"You are very good," I said sneeringly. "No doubt Miss Fitzgerald would feel immensely flattered if she could hear you at the present moment."

After the story I had just been listening to of De Courcy's heartless conduct, and poor Nell's despair and disgust at discovering the depravity of the man in whom she had believed so fully, it made me literally mad to hear Dicky talk in this flippant, calculating way. Miss Fitzgerald seemed to me almost sacred, and it was torture to hear her discussed in the coarse, loose fashion current amongst men of the world.

"I'll tell her what I think of her before long," replied Dicky, with abominable self-sufficiency. "Quick, and to the point; that's my motto on these occasions. There is nothing to be gained by hanging about, penning sonnets to your lady's eyebrows, and then not having courage to deliver them. Take the citadel by storm, and all opposition vanishes as if by magic."

"Young puppy," I muttered under my breath, then aloud:

"I don't agree with you, Dicky. You talk of Miss Fitzgerald as if she were some ignorant school-girl; whereas, depend upon it, she has a pretty intimate acquaintance with heiress hunters, and is quite sharp

enough to see through their designs. You are by no means the first handsome young Adonis who has laid his heart and hand at her feet, with a modest request that the treasures may be accepted."

"Never mind," returned Dicky, with undisturbed good humour, for upon this particular afternoon he was clearly on far too good terms with himself to be annoyed by any amount of plain speaking. "There is no harm in trying, and it does not follow, even though dozens of other men have failed, that I should do so likewise."

"If you try to the end of time," I said, "you will never succeed. For goodness' sake leave the poor girl alone, and don't bother her with your attentions."

Dicky opened his blue eyes wide in insulted amazement.

"Bother the poor girl with *my—my* attentions!" he repeated indignantly. "Well, I'm dashed! that is a joke." And he gave vent to a forced laugh.

"I suppose you imagine it quite impossible for any woman not to appreciate them—eh?"

He recovered himself sufficiently to say:

"I have not met with one yet who did not. The more compliments you pay the sex, and the thicker you lay it on all round, the better pleased they are."

"Some, perhaps," I returned sceptically, "but not all; and you make a great mistake in taking it for granted that every girl resembles the fast, flirt young women with whom you are in the habit of associating. Even in the nineteenth century there are a few modest ones about."

"They are mighty scarce," interrupted Dicky.

"I am sorry you should entertain such an opinion of ladies in general," I replied. "It only proves your knowledge of *real ladies* to be slight."

"And I maintain that you are absurdly Quixotic," retaliated he; "quite childishly so."

"Very well. Time will show which of us is right; and if Miss Fitzgerald consents to become Mrs. Richard Dawson before our leave is out and we say

good-bye to the Shires, then I shall confess myself to having been utterly and completely in the wrong."

Dicky was a veritable child in his humours. He caught eagerly at the mere suggestion of such good fortune.

"By Jove, Miles," he exclaimed, "what a grand thing it would be! I would make merry at the Towers, and have you to stay with me all the hunting season."

"It would be just about the very worst thing that could happen to you," I replied, coolly. "And I certainly should not avail myself of your invitation."

"Why not?"

"Because if you had nothing to do, nothing to wish for, nothing to make you work, and develop your natural abilities, you would quickly degenerate into an idle, selfish, despicable fellow." And so saying, I took up my hat and walked out of the room, leaving Dicky to digest my remarks as best he could. Fortunately he was pretty well accustomed to the wholesome truths with which I considered it my duty to deluge him, and they did not occasion that offence which they might have done had they come from any other quarter. We snarled and growled at each other, but with the exception of the one topic on which we could not agree, we managed to get on very well on the whole, and had remarkably few quarrels of a really serious nature.

That night my slumbers were again disturbed.

The story of Reginald De Courcy haunted my brain, and I could not succeed in banishing it. I longed to tell Dicky what I had heard, partly for his own and partly for Nell's sake. If I could, I would have saved him from the humiliation of descending to the same level as De Courcy, and I felt certain that all his flowery speeches would fall upon barren ground, and produce no other result save that of earning Nell's contempt. Nevertheless, the promise made to Mrs. Hooper effectually sealed my lips, since it would have been dishonourable to break it.

And yet—shall I confess my own unworthy weakness, in spite of the conviction that Dicky's suit would not

prosper as he so confidently anticipated, I felt jealous of the boy; jealous of his good looks, bright, easy manner, and sublime self-assurance. I had never coveted these things before, but now they seemed to me most enviable possessions. I would have given half a kingdom to have had the same serene confidence in my own powers of fascination. It gave a man boldness and courage, those very qualities which my friend assured me women prized so highly. Whereas I, even whilst thinking most tenderly of her I loved, was filled with so many doubts and hesitations, accompanied by so crushing a sense of my short-comings, that my heart failed me at the very outset.

Then I took to wondering, as I tossed between the sheets, whether Nell would go hunting on the morrow. I weighed over the pros and the cons, until at length I reluctantly came to the conclusion that the probabilities were entirely in favour of her staying at home. She was not likely to be out two days running. The fatigue was too much for her slender frame; and, besides, she had already ridden Sweetheart, and could not possibly hunt him again so soon. Ah! if I had only known for certain, I would have defied my aching limbs and back, and gone twenty miles, on the chance alone, of seeing her. No power on earth could have kept me at home.

But now I must wait until the evening of the next day. It seemed a long time, but perhaps, if fortune were kind, I might have the good luck to sit beside her. Mrs. Hooper had said it was only to be a small party—an informal meeting of friends, such as often proves truly enjoyable—and at the dinner-table, where conversation is more or less a bounden duty, and the guest is expected to make himself agreeable to his hostess, my horrible, oppressive, suffocating shyness might gradually melt away, and enable me to appear to moderate advantage.

Brilliant I never was, but I could behave like any ordinary member of society, and engage some small share of Nell's attention. I did not approve of Dicky's

advice ; but I would profit by it in a slight degree. I would *force* myself to speak, and not give Nell the opportunity of seeing how deeply the mere thought of her affected my whole being. I had heard it said that a man should never allow a woman to know how great is her influence over him. I must not let Nell suspect that a glance from her clear brown eyes had power to set my heart a-beating, and my blood a-dancing, until I hardly knew myself as the plain, sober Miles Manington, who—save his mother—had never cared for any woman upon earth. I was bewitched ; but a few remnants of common sense still remained to save me from making an utter fool of myself.

Thus musing, at last I fell asleep, and dreamed uneasy dreams, that prevented me from deriving much benefit from my slumbers.

CHAPTER XV.

THROWN OUT.

THE cold, wintry sun was shining in at my window on the following morning, when I awoke ; and Dicky, fully equipped for the chase, stood close at my bed-side. His voice, in fact, first brought me back to consciousness.

“Hulloa, old man !” he exclaimed, as I stretched myself with a yawn. “Awake at last ? Upon my word, I began to think I never should succeed in rousing you. It’s past nine o’clock, and breakfast is on the table.”

“You don’t say so !” I ejaculated.

“It is, indeed ; and Martingale has sent in to know if you are going hunting to-day or not. He said you did not give him any positive orders yesterday.”

“Of course I’m going,” I replied, jumping—or rather trying to jump—out of bed ; for I found I was still very stiff, and not able to move with my usual alacrity. I

determined, however, to play the invalid no longer, and decided to try the effect of active exercise on my aching muscles.

"If the worst comes to the worst, I can always ride about," I said to myself, consolingly. "It's better than stopping at home, at any rate."

So I dressed in haste, swallowed my breakfast with all the dispatch which that important meal will allow of, and an hour later was well on my way to covert.

Unfortunately Obadiah did not possess the smooth, easy paces of The Siren. He was a round, cobby-shaped horse, very strong in the back, with not the best of shoulders, and his trot even under the most favourable conditions was remarkable for its roughness. He shuffled along, and his wretched rider had to bump, wriggle, and rise, rise, wriggle, and bump as best he could. To-day I found this pastime particularly trying; more especially when the under-bred old brute changed his legs—a bad habit of his—and threw up his great fiddle head in playful freshness.

As we jogged along at the orthodox six-miles-an-hour pace, the conviction grew strongly upon me that this day's hunting was likely to be attended with a good deal more pain than pleasure. Occasionally an agonizing thrill would shoot through my entire frame when Obadiah lurched down heavily into a grip, whilst an involuntary groan escaped my lips.

"What a beast he is," I exclaimed, as he almost toppled down on to his nose, thereby causing me the most exquisite agony. "Why on earth can't he keep his eyes open?"

"Go back, old fellow," advised Dicky. "Give yourself another day's rest. You really are not fit to be on horseback. An arm-chair would be far more to the point."

But I was obstinate and moreover loth to acknowledge defeat, and having once started resolved to proceed, even although I unwillingly admitted to myself that jumping would probably prove out of the question. Indeed I doubted my capacity to stay on if

I attempted to leap. Nevertheless it was just possible that when I warmed up and my blood got thoroughly heated the pain might subside. As bad luck would have it, we had a long way to jog to covert; the meet being about ten to twelve miles distant from Whinboro'.

At last, after a ride which I, for one, found anything but enjoyable, we arrived at our destination, and almost the very first person I set eyes on was Captain Hooper. He was riding a fidgety young horse that lashed out at every hound within a yard of him, thereby incurring the blessings of huntsman and whips. Directly he saw me, he came up and kindly enquired after my condition, but any continuous or prolonged conversation was impossible owing to the extreme fractiousness of his steed.

"That seems a hot one you are on," I remarked. "Is he a good hunter?"

"So so," he replied. "I am riding him for an hour or two, to qualify him for our Hunt Steeplechases, in the spring. But he is very raw and green at present."

That he certainly was; seeming indeed but half-broken, and a less perfect horseman than Captain Hooper would have experienced great difficulty in handling him. Any further remarks were put an end to by his suddenly wheeling round and letting fly with both hind legs at Obadiah, who had been amusing himself by quietly nibbling at his mane. Fortunately he just missed hitting him.

"By Jove! that was a near thing," exclaimed Captain Hooper. "It strikes me I had better move on."

"I think so too," I assented, for little as I valued Obadiah, I had no desire to have his leg broken. "Your friends will have to fight shy of you to-day."

At this juncture, hounds began to stir, and we quickly formed in procession at their heels, whilst the whole company proceeded down a narrow road at a good steady trot. I learnt that our draw was to be

Barnington Gorse, a covert situated in the choicest part of the Whinboro' county and celebrated for the fine runs it had afforded in former years.

Neither to-day did it belie its reputation; for no sooner had hounds been put in at one end than a fox went off at the other. He was evidently a lively gentleman, loth to lose time, for he stole along at a rattling pace, his small red body being only just perceptible as he glided through the long yellowish-green edish of an undrained meadow. It is not easy however to escape the glances of a hundred eyes, all eager to discover the same object, as Reynard found to his cost. A clamour of voices filled the air, warning the silent hounds that their fox had escaped; quickly they got on his track, and let loose the varied music of their tongues. The horses pricked their ears and quivered in every limb with excitement.

"Tally-ho! Tally-ho! Yonder he goes! Forrard my beauties!" cried the huntsman as he puffed at his silver horn; then bending eagerly forward, with his hawk-like eye fixed on the pack, galloped on in pursuit, giving the signal to scores of dashing horsemen to follow his example.

My first intention on seeing the fox steal away was to remain on the prudential side and join the mighty army of Macadamites. But the glorious sight of flying hounds running mute on a burning scent, and a line of redcoats brightening all the field in their rear, was more than I could stand.

But, alas! he who hesitates is lost. In all circumstances of life, the gift of prompt decision is an invaluable one, but nowhere is it more so than in the hunting-field. The man who wavers—first thinks he will do this thing, then that, and cannot choose between the two—loses many a chance of seeing sport.

The few seconds of hesitation in which I had indulged proved fatal, and in consequence I found myself left many lengths in the rear of the hard riding division, amongst whom it was usually my pride and ambition to be numbered.

I clapped spurs into Obadiah, hoping that a friendly check at starting, such as often occurs before hounds have fairly settled down to the line, might occur, but no such luck awaited me on this particular occasion. They streamed away like wild-fire, and I had the mortification of seeing the distance between us steadily increase instead of lessen. In despair I tried to make a lucky nick, and fancying I perceived the leading hounds were inclined to bend somewhat to the right, I galloped off in that direction; but no sooner had I done so, than they turned sharply to the left again, and left me in a worse predicament than before. Any one accustomed to fox-hunting knows how easy it is for a man to go wrong. It is astonishing how soon the vast crowd will disappear in all directions, and a couple of bad turns are quite sufficient to leave one companionless and alone. Humiliating as such a situation is, it now befell me.

Those few moments of indecision had probably lost me a first-class run, for it was evident that the scent was unusually good, and with a quick active fox before them, hounds might travel many miles. My present disaster—for I viewed it in no less serious a light—only proved to me once again the absolute necessity of decision. Either one must boldly throw in one's lot with the roadsters or the riders. No middle course prospers. The shirkers or the thrusters are those in whom to put faith.

Thus I bitterly reflected, as I cursed my own folly, and rode round the field which I was in, in search of a gate. I was separated from the diminishing forms of the rearmost horseman by a remarkably stiff stake and bound fence, that had a very deep and newly cut ditch on the near side. The earth had been piled up moreover, so that to clear the whole required a decent fly.

Now ditches, towards him, were not at all to Obadiah's mind; and the deeper they were the more he disliked them. Of this fact I was but too well aware. No doubt in the heat and ardour of a good run, he might have been induced to negotiate such an

obstacle as the one now before him, but the chances were all against his doing so in comparatively cold blood, and without any other horses to lead him. As before explained, he did not belong to those delightful animals who love jumping for jumping's sake. He looked upon leaping merely as a means, and not an over pleasant means either, to an end. At present the end was not clearly enough presented to his vision.

Knowing all this, and being anxious moreover not to get another fall, which might have the effect of preventing me from keeping my engagement to dine at Cattington Towers, I hastily made for a gate which I had had the good fortune to espy within fifty yards or so. But, lo and behold! the gate proved to be securely bolted. I pulled and hoisted at it till I grew red in the face and moist with my exertions; finally, I dismounted, with great pain and travail, and tried to remove it from its hinges. No, the obstinate thing was not to be stirred. The farmer to whom it belonged must have had some devilish device for securing it, since I am pretty strong in the arms. What annoyed me most, however, was the loss of time entailed by these ineffectual attempts. At the pace they were going, I might never see hounds again this day, and, even although I was in a manner disabled from following them, the reflection was none the less bitter on that account. I do not believe the man lives who is utterly callous to being hopelessly thrown out. The roadster who never jumps a fence, pounds down the macadam for miles and miles on the off chance of falling in with hounds, even although he loses them again directly he finds them; and to a person really fond of the sport no humiliation is greater, or disappointment more bitter, than that of losing sight of the pack and having to wander about the country in ignominious search of it. People accustomed to the serious ills of life may think such trivial misfortunes of no importance, but they are very real while they last, and occasion a great deal of heart-urning.

The gate was immovable, and I had to make up my mind to one of two things. Either I must jump the fence, and trust to Obadiah's proving in an extraordinarily amiable and obedient mood, or else I must retrace my footsteps some considerable way, and go back to the gap by which I had originally floundered into the field in which I now found myself.

Neither alternative was wholly satisfactory. But few men care to acknowledge defeat, and there is something in the very idea of giving in that sets one's back up. At least, it does mine. I re-mounted Obadiah, spoke to him coaxingly, patted him on the neck, gave him a touch of the spurs, and set him at the fence.

As I expected, round he came; and when Obadiah wished to evade an impediment it was wonderful with what celerity he could swerve to the left. By-the-by, why is it that a horse almost invariably chooses that side?

The worthy Obadiah almost capsized his master, with the effect of greatly upsetting that gentleman's temper.

Now I was determined he should jump, even if I came to hopeless grief in consequence. I rammed Obadiah once more at the fence, and this time with greater success. He was pretty well used to me, and perhaps knew that further resistance was unavailing. Anyhow, the old thief made an unwilling, half-hearted sort of an attempt, and going crash against the binder—which, being new, did not give an inch—tumbled head over heels into the field beyond.

Luckily, although I too bit the dust, I did not relinquish my hold of the bridle, and, rising from the ground, was just congratulating myself on having escaped so well, when a soft, distressed voice, close at my side, said:

"Oh! Captain Mannington, I am so sorry you have had another fall. How unlucky you are to be sure! But I do hope you are not much hurt."

I started and looked round. To my surprise, con-

fusion, and delight, there was Nell, mounted on a good-looking white cob, about fourteen hands high, clad in a neat pepper-and-salt habit, and gazing at me with an expression of such visible concern that it made my pulses quicken and my heart beat tumultuously. My vexation at losing the hounds was all forgotten in a moment.

"How do you do, Miss Fitzgerald?" I said, attempting to speak coolly. "I hope I did not frighten you?"

"You did a little," answered she; "I can't bear seeing people tumble about."

"And you will think I am always indulging in the practice?"

"It looks rather like it," she said, with a smile. "I see my lecture on health did not make any very great impression." And she glanced at my still inflamed countenance.

"But you never delivered it. You only declared you would do so."

"Well, that is pretty much the same thing. Once I really begin to preach, Captain Mannington, you have no idea how eloquent I grow."

"I wish you would begin now."

"What? This minute?"

"Yes."

"Then," and her face assumed such a pretty, babyish look of reproach, "you are a very, very naughty man for trying to hunt when you know you are not able. There, do you like that?"

"Extremely. What next?"

"You have no business to ride in your present state, and as for jumping, it is positive madness, until you get better."

"But I was obliged to jump, Miss Fitzgerald. I could not help myself."

"You might have gone for the gate," severely.

"I did; but it would not open. I almost broke my back in trying to heave it off its hinges. If I had not decided to jump this fence, I should have had to go round nearly a quarter of a mile."

"Don't you like going round?" relenting a little.

"Not at all! Do you?"

Nell gave me a bright look full of unmistakable sympathy.

"Well, no; I can't say that I do."

"Will you forgive me then for being such an object?" I said, as I took out my pocket-handkerchief, and removed a large clod of mud from my right cheek.

Nell laughed. A pleasant little silvery laugh that sounded sweet in my ears. It had such a girlish, merry, innocent ring about it.

"We are all of us objects," she said. "At the present moment, you are more one of pity, than anything else."

The saying that "pity is akin to love," immediately occurred to my mind, and had I been Dicky I should have probably made some felicitous remark on the subject; but instinct seemed to warn me that the surest way of putting a constraint upon our hitherto informal intercourse was by attempting to pay Miss Fitzgerald foolish, commonplace compliments. I might not be very sharp, but I was sharp enough to know intuitively that she was certain to resent such conduct from a comparative stranger.

Frank and open as she was, she was not the least of a flirt, and I think that that fact constituted one of her greatest charms.

"How did you come to get thrown out, Captain Mannington?" she enquired.

I explained that I had intended to ride about quietly, but that the sight of the hounds in full cry had been too much for my good resolutions.

"It seemed such a mean sort of thing," I said, "to scuttle off full tilt for the nearest road, directly our fox broke covert. One has a contempt for people who take to their heels on the slightest approach of danger."

"And so," said Nell, with a merry smile, "Pride had a fall."

"Pride fell between two stools, and came as you see to utter grief. If it had not been for your presence, which relieves my complete solitude, I should have met with bitter punishment." And I thought to myself how luckily everything had turned out.

"And what are you going to do next?" asked Nell with interest.

"Me? I have not the smallest idea. Hounds must be miles away by this time."

"You don't seem very anxious to catch them."

"Don't I? I was until you appeared; since then I have become reconciled to my present ignominious position. There is nothing like a partner in misfortune."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Nell, comically. "It never struck me that I was sharing in your ignominy; that will never do. Would you condescend to accept so humble a guide as myself? If so, I believe we might wipe out our disgrace."

"Condescend, indeed! Give me the chance, that's all."

"Oh! I thought that such a *very* hard-riding young man," and Nell looked up saucily into my face, "might not care to be piloted by a girl on a pony."

"And why not? It all depends on who the girl is."

"He might consider it *infra dig*."

I laughed out loud.

"*Infra dig*. be blowed!" I said, not over elegantly, and thinking how willingly I would lose the best run on earth to have the chance of a quiet ten minutes' chat with Nell. "You are talking nonsense, if you will excuse my saying so."

"That's polite," she remarked demurely. "Is your dignity hurt at the expression?"

"My dignity is not so sensitive as you seem to imagine, Miss Fitzgerald, and nothing would give me greater pleasure than to be led by you."

"In that case," said Nell, "let us lose no more time. Can you clamber up on the saddle, or are your injuries too severe?"

"I think I can manage," I replied, getting one foot into the stirrup, and hoisting myself on to Obadiah's back by his thick mane. "There! now I am quite ready."

"All right," said Nell, moving on. "I will show you the way, since you do not know the country as well as I do. My belief is that the hounds have gone to Cossington Chase. Anyhow, they are sure to draw it in the afternoon, so if we go straight there, we are certain to fall in with them sooner or later."

"Do you intend taking me across country?" I asked facetiously.

"No, certainly not," replied Nell, decidedly. "I intend taking you by a very safe road, and not giving you the chance to tumble about any more." And as she spoke she looked me straight in the face with a pair of laughing hazel eyes.

"Supposing I rebel?" It was delightful provoking her to repartee.

"You won't, you are too sensible."

"Would you ride after me and rescue your captive, or leave him alone?"

"I think—" and Nell paused a moment, "I think I should ride after you, but," with tremendous determination, "I should give you an awful scolding when I caught you."

"Altogether, then, I am better as I am?"

"Much. Only people never know when they are well off."

"I do. I am perfectly content, Miss Fitzgerald. You can lead me like a lamb. I only came out to potter, and consider myself highly fortunate in having met you."

I began to feel quite at my ease. Nell's manner was so frank and natural, that it was impossible not to thaw when exposed to its charm.

"Yes," she said, "I too am a potterer to-day. Will you tell uncle this evening how good I have been?"

"Are you not always good?"

"Oh! yes, of course, but to-day I am specially so."

"Indeed! I am glad to hear it. What are you like in a naughty mood?"

"Now, Captain Mannington, you are teasing. I want you to tell uncle that I obeyed orders to the letter, and stuck to the road. This cob I am riding is one of Captain Hooper's which we are thinking of buying, and uncle did not want me to hunt to-day, because he had to go to Littlehampton on business; but Captain Hooper sent the cob round in the morning, and after a deal of persuasion I managed to induce uncle to let me come out by myself and try his paces. I made a solemn promise not to jump anything bigger than gaps."

"And I am to tell Mr. Austen you kept your word — is that it?"

"Exactly. There is nothing like having a disinterested witness to give testimony in your favour."

"And supposing I am not disinterested?"

The colour mounted to her face.

"I infer that you are. Don't make me imagine the contrary, or I shall be disappointed. At any rate, let me think so for the present. Disillusion comes fast enough."

Nell's words were capable of a twofold meaning. I immediately construed them seriously, and imagined she was warning me on no account to tread the dangerous paths of flirtation, for fear of losing her esteem. They threw a considerable damper on my rising spirits, and showed me how absolutely necessary it was to maintain the strictest self-control. It seemed to me that she as good as said, "I will be friendly and pleasant, open and communicative, as long as you steer perfectly clear of sentiment, and don't attempt to make love to me; but from the moment you offend me by your too fervent and demonstrative speeches, then good-bye to any agreeable companionship. Therefore make up your mind as to your behaviour."

Anyhow, I placed the above construction on her last speech, and being still new to my love, and as shy about it as a school-boy, I relapsed into silence, and

watched admiringly, as we trotted along, with what graceful precision my companion's slight, rounded figure rose and fell to the action of her cob. Now, I have always maintained, that to trot well is the very great test of a woman's riding. One sees scores of well-habited, well "got-up" ladies in the Row and elsewhere, who whilst walking sedately, or even cantering gently, appear to sit their horses to perfection. But directly they attempt a good, honest trot, they flounder and roll, and wriggle and hump, and jerk in a truly distressing fashion. Some work their arms, some their legs, some lean forward till their noses almost touch their horses' ears; others incline to one side of the saddle, until it is a marvel they manage to retain their centre of gravity. But when you see a woman trot quietly, gracefully, truly, sitting perfectly straight, and rising to the horse as if she were part of himself—when you see her elbows well in to her side, her hands in proper position, her legs not indulging in a species of spasmodic pump-handle action, then you may be pretty sure that she knows how to ride really well.

Nell's trotting was perfection. It was a pleasure to look at it; nevertheless, after a few minutes had elapsed, I felt it incumbent upon me to resume the conversation. I resolved, however, to stick to platitudes, and not expose myself to another snub.

CHAPTER XVI.

A FAIR PILOT.

"I SUPPOSE you ride a great deal, Miss Fitzgerald?" I remarked presently, by way of breaking the silence that had fallen between us.

"Nearly every day," she replied; "but I am not supposed to hunt more than two days a-week. Uncle does not approve of what he calls the regular hunting woman."

"And do you?" I enquired, for I fancied I detected a slight tone of regret.

"I like anything that tires me out."

"What an extraordinary statement."

"Physical fatigue is the only real remedy for thought," explained Nell, whilst her face suddenly assumed a serious expression.

Had I not known her history, I should have been astonished at this observation coming from a girl of about twenty summers, but as it was, I could enter into her feelings.

"And why should you wish to prevent thought?" I asked quietly, wondering what sort of an answer she would vouchsafe to the question.

She was riding a yard or two ahead of me, but, checking the cob a trifle, she half turned round in the saddle, and gave me one swift and searching look. Then apparently satisfied that I did not make the enquiry from idle curiosity alone, she replied, with a hastily stifled sigh:

"Because thinking is about the very worst habit a woman can indulge in."

"That is a curious theory, Miss Fitzgerald. May I ask your reason for entertaining it?"

"Have you ever heard or read of any really clever woman who was happy?" said Nell categorically.

"Look at George Eliot, George Sand, and a host of others one could mention. Directly we women, as a body, begin to think, it is more or less inevitable that, except under very favourable circumstances, we should become dissatisfied with our position in life."

I confess to having been somewhat startled by this declaration of Nell's, and felt anxious to learn more of her views. From a person of forty they might have come naturally, but not from one so young.

"Are you a Woman's Righter?" I asked.

"No; not in the ordinary sense of the word. The movement has been too much abused, and gone the wrong way to work."

"What do you mean, then, by saying your sex should banish thought?"

"I mean that when we begin to exercise our brains, and see things as they actually are, and not with blinded eyes, we cannot help perceiving the injustice with which we are treated. We are not men—I doubt even if many of us would wish to be men—but we desire an end put to the oppression of the weak by the strong."

"Unfortunately it is the law of Nature," I remarked.

"And what is civilization for except to improve upon the laws of Nature?" retorted Nell, in an animated tone. "Look at the inequality of those laws made by man. They are framed simply to suit himself. There are some that at no distant date must be altered, since their unfairness is patent to the world."

"It is a difficult subject, Miss Fitzgerald, although I admit you have a good deal of right on your side."

"Yes," said Nell gravely. "To be happy and content we should be blessed with few or no ideas, we should never venture to depart from the regular beaten track, we should enjoy three substantial meals a day, converse about none but trivial matters—such as babies, servants, and the affairs of our neighbours—and employ our spare time in the homely but tedious knitting of stockings, enlivened by a few sensational novels that are forgotten as soon as read; but if we are foolish enough to speculate, to meditate and analyze, then we are done for, and become both discontented and unhappy."

She was speaking in bitter earnest, and I realized that beneath all her apparent brightness of manner there lay a deep vein of philosophical thought, tinged and perverted by the ill treatment she had received. There could be no doubt about her prettiness and niceness. Even whilst uttering the crudest sentiments, and in spite of a certain rawness incidental to her youth, she was undeniably clever, and however much she might profess to envy them, she herself was evidently not one of the placid females whom she

described as possessing but few or no ideas. Nell's mind was active, on the alert, and even at times daringly original.

I paused a few seconds before replying, being intent on pondering over her last speech.

"I think what you really mean is this," I said at length. "Woman is an emotional being, and she stakes all when she loves. Marriage is the great event of her life. If she be happy in her home, then she is supremely content with her lot. According to you, the stupid woman may also jog along fairly well because she is dull, inert, unsensitive, and appreciates her creature comforts. But the clever one, who has made her venture, and knows that it has failed, cannot rest, or fall back upon fine clothes, good eating and drinking as a compensation. Her heart aches. There is a void in it somewhere, and when she finds this out, her head takes the mastery and begins to dictate. Such women, as you truly say, are not happy. They may be ever so talented, ever so charming and fascinating, but there always remains a certain sense of dissatisfaction and of life-weariness. In other words, they have not fulfilled their vocation."

"Yes," said Nell, meditatively. "You are right in what you say. Perhaps," and her voice trembled a little, "the misfortune is, that we women set too much store by our love. It is everything to us; whereas with you men, it is only a very slight element, which scarcely disturbs the current of your life. You have so many loves, and are constant to so few. The heart does not triumph over your reason, as with us; and when one person deceives you, you find no difficulty in turning to another for consolation. We, if we were wise, should follow your example, and not lavish our affections on unworthy objects." And she gave a little forced laugh, that, to me, seemed full of bitterness, and betrayed a heavy spirit.

"And yet," I said, "woman would not be woman, if it were not for that beautiful clinging to those she once has cared for. See how she will stick to the worst of

husbands, and bear anything for his sake. In my opinion, the greatest piece of good fortune that can possibly happen to a man, is to gain the love of some fresh, honest young girl." And, almost unconsciously, I fixed my eyes on those of my companion. At first her clear orbs returned my gaze frankly; then, as by degrees the colour stole into Nell's face, they drooped and drooped, until I could only see the long, dark lashes resting on her sweet, crimson cheeks. Our steeds, during the above conversation, had subsided from a trot to a walk, and we were riding side by side. Nell gave the white cob a smart touch with her hunting crop, and urged him into a canter. She seemed vexed with herself for having allowed me to see so much of her inner nature, and tried to assume a lighter tone.

"I can't imagine why we have fallen into so serious a vein," she said, a trifle petulantly. "It is quite unsuited for the hunting field. Come, Captain Manington, let us make haste; and, if we must talk, we will stick to horses and hounds—or some suitable topic of conversation. Love and women have been worn quite thread-bare long ago." So saying, she rode swiftly on, at a pace that effectually put an end to any further interchange of ideas. But she had told me enough to set me thinking for many a day to come. Poor little darling! I could realize the state of her mind; and understood how that ruffian De Courcy had so thoroughly disgusted her with men, that she hardly knew with whom to feel at her ease. And yet, her nature was clearly not a distrustful one; and while she gave vent to many of her sceptical opinions, she would have been only too thankful to find anybody who could effectually disprove them. She was not old enough to be as hard and cold as she would fain appear. That total disbelief of the sterner sex was only a mask which she assumed for self-preservation, being all the time in mortal fear that a pin-prick would penetrate it. So when she began to get moved, she immediately started a totally different subject.

Oh, Nell, Nell! If you had only known, you were

quite safe with me. I would do nothing to offend your maidenly susceptibilities, and longed only to show my sympathy.

As for me, I cared no more about the hounds by this time than if I had been toiling under a tropical sun. Their whereabouts was a matter of complete indifference, and I devoutly wished my companion would forget them also.

She, however, evidently possessed the sporting instinct in an unusually high degree; and, all at once, appeared uncommonly anxious to come up with the pack. Perhaps she thought our *tête-à-tête* had lasted long enough; or, very likely—as I said to myself—she was bored with my society already. I had not Dicky's happy flow of small talk or enviable faculty of making myself agreeable to ladies.

"I wonder where they are?" said Nell, whilst her keen eye scoured the country round. "I can't see anything of them, unless they are hidden behind yonder hill."

Just as she spoke the faint sound of a distant horn came borne to our ears.

"Hark," exclaimed Nell, pulling the cob up to a stand. "Did you hear that?"

"I fancied I heard the horn," I said, wishing hounds and huntsmen miles away.

She listened again, then, catching a few musical notes, an expression of satisfaction settled upon her features.

"Yes," she said, "they are going to Cossington Chase just as I thought, and they are hunting slowly. That was old Rhapsody who gave tongue, a sure indication the fox is still before him. We may take things as easily as we like now, for they are safe to hang about for some time, and we are close to the Chase. When you see the hounds again, then I hope you will feel happy, Captain Mannington."

"I am very happy as it is, Miss Fitzgerald. I do not know that they will add much to my enjoyment."

"Hush, that's heresy. Why, I thought you were

never satisfied unless you were right up in front, cutting out the work and flying over regular man-traps."

"Indeed! What gave you such an idea?"

"Chiefly my own observations, and the opinion I have formed of your character."

"Will you not tell me what that is?"

"You are very determined, for one thing."

"Do you object to determination in a man?"

"No, I like it. I can't bear your undecided creatures."

"What other mental notes have you made at my expense, Miss Fitzgerald?"

"You are ambitious, Captain Mannington; awfully so, in fact."

"Ambitious of what?"

"Of excelling. You hate to be beaten."

"So do most people."

"When you make up your mind to a thing you don't shilly-shally. You go straight ahead and steer for your point. You may have any number of faults, but at least you are not weak."

"Thank you," I said, feeling exceedingly amused and rather flattered at Nell's summing up of my character. "But you have not substantiated your statement yet, as regards my never being happy unless I am at the tail of the hounds."

"I will, though. I can do so easily. Do you remember a stiff flight of rails you jumped the other day, when there was no absolute occasion, but simply because you *would* be first?" And she shot an arch look in my direction.

"Now, that's unkind. I remember somebody else who jumped them too, and with far less provocation."

"Anyhow my case is proved."

"Not a bit. And now, may I ask a question?"

"Most certainly; provided it be one I can answer."

"Very well, then. Tell me, are you in the habit of taking such break-neck leaps? If so, I am not surprised your uncle disapproves of your hunting."

Nell gave a little saucy toss of her shapely head.

"Must I answer?" she said pertly.

"You promised."

"And am I to be quite truthful?"

"Quite, but that I feel sure you always are."

"Frankly then, no. Only on rare occasions, when my blood is up. As a rule I am not partial to stiff timber."

"What made you jump such rails as those?"

She shrugged her shoulders, with a little careless gesture, inexpressibly charming.

"I had a very good reason."

"What was it?"

"I hate to be beaten. I am like you in that respect; but especially by a—a—*man*."

She pronounced the last word with such a comically contemptuous emphasis that for the life of me I could not help laughing.

"You consider it derogatory?"

She nodded her head.

"Have you so mean an opinion of us as all that?" I asked jestingly.

"Do you wish me to offend you, Captain Mannington?" responded Nell, taking refuge in a counter interrogation.

"I don't believe you could do so if you tried."

"Couldn't I? If I were to answer that question I should soon succeed."

"Even now I doubt it. Anyhow I give you full leave to try."

"You are rash. Believe me, when I say it is far better for me to maintain a discreet silence; then I cannot be rude or disagreeable." And she pursed up her rosy mouth as much as to intimate that not a word should escape from it.

I laughed again. She was so awfully *piquante* and amusing with her quaint little ways and original sayings. There was a freshness about her that captivated me completely, and rendered argument simply delightful.

"But you have made a serious confession already," I retaliated gravely.

"Me! How so?" And Nell looked the picture of innocence.

"Why, have you not as good as said to my face, 'Captain Mannington, I hate and despise your sex, and consider nothing too bad for it?'"

Nell blushed furiously. I was only in jest, but the next minute to my horror I saw two big tears trickle slowly down her cheeks.

"It does seem rude of me," she said, "but," and her voice dropped almost to a whisper, "you do not know all."

I felt a perfect beast for playing upon her feelings as I had done.

"Oh!" I cried impulsively, "I am so sorry; I was only joking, and never thought you would take my foolish chaff seriously. I would not have wounded you for all the world." And I meant what I said.

I think the distressed tone of my voice must have carried conviction, and at least proved me innocent of wilful offence, for Nell hastily brushed her small gloved hand across her face, and looked at me with a kindly expression of countenance.

"Never mind me," she said in a low voice. "Don't take any notice, please. I can't help being a goose sometimes, and every now and again a chance word recalls certain events in the past, which I fain would forget if I could."

I hardly knew what to say. Words seemed so poor when the heart was full. I held out my hand in silent sympathy, and to my joy Nell seemed to understand what I meant, for she put hers into my big, bare palm and let it rest there for a second or two. I could not help squeezing the little fingers. I should scarcely have been human had I refrained.

"You can trust me?" I said, somewhat unsteadily, for a curious lump was rising in my throat.

She lifted her eyes to mine, and I looked deep into them, never flinching from their gaze.

"I—I believe I can," she said at last. "But, oh! pray, Captain Mannington, don't let me find that I am

wrong in my estimation, for it will be a bitter blow to me." And she choked back the rising sob.

Poor little soul! I knew quite well what she meant. She was longing to regain her lost trust and confidence. Any idea of love had not entered her head.

"You never shall," I said earnestly; "at least if I can help it."

"Will you be my friend?" she said simply. "I want one very badly, to right me in my ideas. The last year or two they seem all topsy-turvy."

"Yes, I will," I said fervently. "So help me God, I will be your friend until death."

"Thank you. And you promise not to think it odd my asking this favour on so short an acquaintance? I cannot speak to every one, but some how or other I feel as if I could speak to you."

"Say what you like," I said. "Your confidences will never go farther."

"You asked me a question just now, Captain Mannington, and at the time I did not want to reply. It is quite true that I do not like men. Perhaps you have heard, or guess, that I have been rather unfortunate in my experiences."

I bowed my head.

"I took a hatred to the entire sex," went on Nell, "but lately I have come to think that perhaps I may have been wrong in judging all-men by one bad specimen. Is it not Carlyle who says, in 'Sartor Resartus,' that when we discover the coin that we took to be gold is only brass, we jump to extremes, and immediately fancy the whole world contains but the baser metal? By slow degrees, however, a reaction sets in, and gradually the conviction grows upon us that we may have been unjust in our sweeping condemnations. Is that not so?" And she turned to me appealingly.

"It is," I replied, "though believe me, Miss Fitzgerald, that a few gold coins exist, even among men."

"I am glad to hear you say so," she said with a sigh of relief. "It is horrid to think badly of one's fellow-

creatures. It makes one quite uncomfortable. Only." and she hesitated—"I—I—am afraid."

"You need not be," I said, scarcely above a whisper. "Trust me."

Once again she raised her clear eyes to mine, and seemed to read me through and through. And as she gazed at me in this innocent, half-doubting, half-confiding way, I felt that I could no more deceive her, and tell a falsehood, than fly. Everything that was best in my nature rose to the surface when exposed to the influence of her honesty and purity.

"I will," she said firmly. "I may be wrong, but I can't go on living and looking at every man I meet as my natural enemy. We will enter into a solemn covenant of friendship, and if I read your character aright you are not one to take advantage of conduct that in the eyes of some men might appear strange."

"No," I said solemnly. "I think I understand what you need. What you want is to regain your lost faith in human nature. You have set me a difficult task, but I will do my best to prove equal to the occasion."

"Thank you for comprehending me," she said with a blush and a smile. "Very few people would have done so, so thoroughly."

So saying she gave her bridle a shake, and did not speak again until we arrived at Cossington Chase.

CHAPTER XVII.

WELL SNUBBED.

It would have been impossible for any man, who was not an absolute coxcomb to take Nell's advances otherwise than as they were meant. She wanted a friend, and had not a thought of love. Indeed, the least approach to sentiment would have affrighted her altogether. I realized this fact from the outset, and was

aware that it was just because I was ugly, and sober and slow, that she chose to honour me with her confidence. She felt that our friendship was not a dangerous thing, and did not give me credit for entertaining any warmer sentiments. All this I knew quite well, and probably on reflection would not derive much encouragement from the compact we had just entered into; but I could not pause to reason whilst in Nell's presence, and for the present I felt wildly, foolishly, idiotically happy! I had no definite views. It did not enter my head to suppose that Nell could return my affection. I was curiously diffident, but it was pleasure enough to be able to look at her, and talk to her, and feel that an intimacy was springing up between us. I too was young, and did not gaze far into futurity. The sunshine of the golden moment sufficed, and at that time, two whole months in which to meet and exchange ideas seemed a long while to look forward to.

When we reached Cossington Chase, we found that the hounds with their immediate attendants had just arrived. That the pace had been first-rate throughout was evident from the warm, flushed faces of the men, and the horse's heaving flanks, distended nostrils, and quivering tails. The poor beasts clearly stood much in need of a check, and were truly thankful when, owing to the presence of several fresh foxes, the scent of the hunted one became foiled, and hounds were reduced to slow hunting in covert.

"We have had a clinking good run," said Captain Hooper, who to my surprise was present, still riding the fidgety brown horse, fidgety now no longer, but in a very limp and perspiring condition. "Between seven and eight miles as the crow flies."

"Were you well carried?" I enquired.

"Capitally; directly hounds found, I meant to have got on to my hunter, but that fool of a fellow of mine never turned up, and I had to ride the young 'un; however, I don't regret it, for until to-day I had no idea he was half so good. He has gone up quite a hundred and fifty in value."

At this juncture, Dicky appeared round a corner, where presumably he had been giving his horse time to regain his wind. The moment he perceived Miss Fitzgerald he joined our little party, whilst Captain Hooper, whose nag seemed pretty well cooked, moved off in search of his second horseman, who doubtless had found the pace too good.

"How do, Miss Fitzgerald?" said Dicky, taking off his hat with a flourish. "This is an unexpected pleasure, since I had not the least idea you were out to-day."

His handsome face was flushed, and his blue eyes sparkled and flashed beneath their finely arched brows. The pleasurable excitement produced by a good run had not subsided, and still lent animation to his features. As he sat bare-headed in the sunshine, with the pale golden rays lighting up his wavy chestnut hair, and investing it with a borrowed glory, a pang shot through me. I could not help admitting to myself what a good-looking young fellow he was, and how likely a one to catch a girl's fancy. Surely his outward appearance must tell in his favour.

"How do you do, Mr. Dawson?" said Nell composedly, in reply. "I hear you have had a very good run. Captain Hooper has just been telling us about it."

"First rate," answered Dicky. "I never enjoyed myself more in my life. Miles, old man, you ought to have been there," turning to me.

"Perhaps so," I responded, with a sly look at Nell, "but I have been in excellent company, and do not regret my backward position."

"Very backward," put in Nell. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Dawson, Captain Mannington and I were extremely unfortunate, and have not seen a single yard of the run."

"Ah!" returned Dicky, gallantly. "I thought our brightest ornament was missing."

"Dear me!" she exclaimed with a mocking laugh. "Do you hear what Mr. Dawson is saying, Captain

Mannington? He calls you 'the brightest ornament,'" and she mimicked Dicky's tone to perfection, "of the Hunt. Don't you feel excessively flattered?"

Dicky coloured and bit his lip. He had a regular girl's complexion, and was given to blushing on slight provocation, a habit that annoyed him not a little, as he fancied it made him appear juvenile. He hardly knew how to take Nell's last remark, not being accustomed to find his pretty speeches, however empty and meaningless they might be, so carelessly received and passed on. Nevertheless, he returned to the charge.

"It has been an awfully good run," he declared; "but, although we ran both faster and straighter to-day, curiously enough I did not care for it nearly as much as I did for our yesterday's hunt."

"Really!" said Nell. "How was that? Were you worse mounted?"

"On the contrary. I prefer the horse I rode to-day. He did not interfere with my enjoyment in any way."

"And what did, pray, if it be an allowable question?"

Here was the opportunity Dicky had so skilfully led up to.

"Do you really wish to know?" he said, with a languishing look at Nell.

"Of course," said she, quite unsuspectingly. "You have excited my curiosity."

"Can't you guess?"

"No; how should I? My powers of divination are small."

He gave his horse a touch with his heel, and sidled up a little nearer to her cob.

"You were not there, Miss Fitzgerald. Is any other reason necessary?"

Nell drew herself up, and placed a couple of yards' distance between them.

"You are very kind, Mr. Dawson," she said coldly, and I fancied I could detect a slight curl of contempt on her short upper lip. "But may I ask if you are given to talking nonsense? Is it a habit you frequently indulge in?"

"That depends on what you call nonsense," replied Dicky, somewhat confusedly. "People's ideas are apt to differ."

"I should not think anybody's ideas could differ as to the remark you have just made. Its politeness, at any rate, outshone its sincerity."

This was too much for poor Dicky. He turned as red as a turkey-cock.

"You're awfully down on a fellow," he mumbled, almost inaudibly.

"Not at all," responded Nell, vivaciously, seeming to enjoy the situation. "But I dislike hearing the first principles of truth violated. Now, when we look dispassionately at the matter, what earthly difference could it make to you whether I was in the run or not?" And she smiled audaciously at me, evidently delighting in his discomfiture. She had a keen sense of the ridiculous.

"But it does," pleaded Dicky. "It makes a great deal of difference."

Nell gave him a scornful look, full of impatient incredulity.

"Then," said she, "you are easily affected by comparatively unknown objects, and I, as the unknown object, ought to feel extremely flattered."

"Pon my word, Miss Fitzgerald," cried Dicky, in despair, "I had no idea you were half so hard-hearted."

"Or so sensible?" said Nell, with a laugh.

"No; hard-hearted. I stick to my words."

"Why? Simply because I don't take your complimentary speeches *quite* in earnest. They are too transparent, Mr. Dawson."

"Women like flattery," returned Dicky, sulkily.

He was getting the worst of it, and the conversation altogether had taken a turn he highly disapproved of.

"Do they? Let me give you a piece of advice then. Please to remember, in future, that it requires to be very, *very* delicately administered. When applied with too coarse a hand, it fails to meet with appreciation."

And so saying, Nell gave a nod and a little light laugh, and rode on to speak to an acquaintance close by, leaving Dicky in a state of utter confusion. I question whether he had ever experienced so perfect a snub, and yet there had been nothing in the least unladylike or vulgar in Nell's manner. Her self-possession was admirable.

Friendly as Dicky and I were, I could not refrain from a secret feeling of satisfaction at his discomfiture. He had thoroughly deserved it, and brought it completely on himself, by his foolish and familiar compliments. Nevertheless, he was not one to remain downhearted for long. It took a good deal really to abash *him*; and by degrees he recovered somewhat of his equanimity, and before many minutes had passed, actually brought himself round to thinking that Nell's rebuff had been entirely produced by shyness and maiden modesty.

"You never can tell with these girls what they really mean," he remarked to me, who had discreetly refrained from adding fuel to the fire. "They take things so differently, and these rich ones are apt to get a bit spoilt, after they have been out a year or two, and give themselves no end of airs. The real thing is they want licking into shape."

"What sort of shape, Dicky?" I asked humorously.

"They think it grand to make a fellow feel small," he returned indignantly, entirely ignoring my query. "It gives them a sense of power, which is gratifying to their vanity; but all the same, they are only human, and are bound to fall sooner or later, like their mother Eve did before them."

"And do you intend to assist Miss Fitzgerald to descend?"

"Yes," he said savagely, "to the level of Mr. Richard Dawson."

"She will have to fall pretty far," I observed, in perfect good humour.

"At any rate," quoth Dicky resolutely, "I mean to give the little minx back as good as she gave."

"You will find that hard, my dear boy. The young lady rejoices in excellent powers of repartee."

"Yes," growled he, "which she exercises at my expense. Upon my word, if it weren't for her money, I declare I'd give her up. I hate a woman with a tongue."

"It is rather an awkward weapon, I admit," I said with a laugh, "especially when it beats the male in argument. We Lords of Creation don't like to put up with defeat from the weaker vessel."

But Dicky had been enough chaffed for one day. He could stand no more, and, making a sudden whimper from the hounds an excuse to rid himself of my society, he plunged into the depths of the wood.

It seemed as if sport were over for to-day, for, tired as the hunted fox must have been, he succeeded in beating his pursuers, whilst, as the afternoon advanced, scent apparently failed. The huntsman, however, continued to persevere, being loth that so good a run should terminate thus tamely.

We were still standing round Cossington Chase, the huntsman intent upon blood, when Nell again trotted up to my side.

"Good-bye," she said, "I am going home."

"You are leaving early," I replied.

"Yes; I have to arrange the flowers for to-night, and uncle said I was to be sure not to stay out late. We shall see you this evening?"

"Most certainly; but are you going back all alone? May I not accompany you?"

"Thanks, you are very kind, but Captain Hooper's second horseman is returning to Whinboro' with his young brown horse, and he will open all the gates for me. I have given you enough trouble as it is."

I did not press the point. I was longing to ride home with her, but after Dicky's little rebuff, dared not expose myself to a similar one. I was fearful of giving offence and of appearing intrusive. Besides, she was so horribly rich.

"Good-bye, then, until to-night," I said, doffing my hat. "I shall look out for the flowers. They are sure to be pretty."

"Ah," said Nell, with a shake of the head. "We are very badly off just at present. You must not expect too much. And now I must positively go. Don't forget to tell uncle how faithfully I have kept my promises."

In spite of her words she seemed inclined to linger.

"I shall make a point of doing so. By Jove! I really do believe they are away with a fresh fox," as a loud "Gone forrard, awa-ay!" echoed on the still air, and put life into the equestrian statues, tired of so prolonged a state of inaction.

"Then I must fly from temptation," said Nell. "Once more, good-bye." And she moved off at a brisk trot, whilst unheeded of the movements of the pack, I stood and watched her retreating form until a sudden bend in the road removed it from vision.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN EVENING AT CATTINGTON TOWERS.

THAT evening I took unusual pains with my toilet.

I discarded at least half-a-dozen white ties, before I at length succeeded in getting one that afforded me complete satisfaction: and when the process of dressing was over I actually went into Dicky's room, and possessing no such luxuries of my own, begged the loan of his scent-bottle. Then, taking out my handkerchief, I sprinkled it liberally with Piesse and Lubin's finest White Rose.

The heavy old brougham, which looked as if it had been built in some former decade, and which now did duty as the evening conveyance of the "Horse and Hound" establishment, had been standing at the door

some little time before our preparations were complete, and we finally got under weigh.

To our consternation we found, on passing through the town, that our watches were nearly ten minutes slow by the large round clock adorning the steeple of Whinboro' Church, and this discovery filled us with anxiety lest we should be late. People dining out at a country place for the first time are apt to indulge in similar fears, not knowing the nature of the road, or how long it will take to accomplish the distance. Thus they arrive at all hours. Sometimes abominably early, at others distressingly after time.

"Put your best foot foremost, my man," said Dicky to the driver, as we seated ourselves on the faded blue cloth cushions; "I am afraid we are late."

Thus adjured, the half-perished looking individual on the box, whose teeth were already chattering with the cold, whipped up his horse—an old hunter who, having gone in the joints, was doomed to this sort of miserable slavery—and by voice and whip did his utmost to urge on the docile but venerable animal to slightly increase his usual rate of speed. In vain! The poor beast's heart was not in his work. Perhaps as he jogged along at a slow trot, and looked at the dark hedges on each side of the road, whose naked topmost twigs were silvering over with a keen hoar-frost, and at the wide green fields whitening beneath the moon's cold and mystic rays, reminiscences of by-gone triumphs rose to his mind. Days when, with fleet limbs and lightsome heart, he had galloped gaily in pursuit of the speckled hounds, and snorted eagerly in response to the loved music of their voices.

Anyhow, by the time we arrived at Cattington Towers we found the company already assembled. Mr. Austen had been as good as his word, and to our very great relief we found no formidable concourse of men and women awaiting our entry, and in their own minds blessing (?) the tardy guests who kept dinner waiting.

Coming in out of the cold, the room struck one with

a pleasant sense of warmth, but the sudden glare of light in our eyes confused us just a little at first, and prevented us from seeing clearly. Mr. Austen immediately advanced with a few words of greeting, and I attempted to mumble out an apology, which he nipped in the bud.

"Late, my dear Mannington?" he exclaimed, with good-humoured sarcasm, "don't mention it. It's only ten minutes after our usual dinner hour, and, now-a-days, I am told, people may consider themselves fortunate if you young men turn up at all."

"Come, uncle, you must not be too hard upon our guests," said Nell, coming forward and cordially shaking hands. "Neither Captain Mannington nor Mr. Dawson is acquainted as yet with your intense love of punctuality. The fact of the matter is," she added brightly, "after we have been out hunting we get so voraciously hungry we feel as if we could not wait a single minute for dinner. It speaks volumes in favour of our Whinboro' air. As for Captain Hooper, he is positively famishing."

By this time we had recovered our equanimity, and I took a good stare at Nell.

How pretty and elegant she looked.

She was dressed in some sort of clear white muslin that fell in soft folds to the ground, without any hideous puffings and flouncings, such as so many of the fair sex are given to patronising. Her arms and neck shone through the transparent texture which but half hid their rounded beauty, and her small waist was encircled by a curiously wrought, old-fashioned silver girdle, the only ornament I noticed that she wore.

But she needed none. Not all the silks and satins and gee-gaws in the world could have conferred that air of simplicity and distinction upon her. These gifts were Nature's own handiwork. The little head, with its abundance of smooth, dark brown hair, arranged in the neatest of braids, the pillar-like throat, which rising thin and straight recalled the carriage of a stately deer, the clear, bright eyes, honest as the

day, fresh complexion, and sweet red-lipped mouth, required no fictitious adornment.

What if the features were not strictly classical, and an artist might have found fault with the somewhat irregular, but altogether charming nose, and taken exception to the extreme width of the brow and determined chin? The expression of the face was delightful; variable as an April day—sad one minute, gay the next—bright, arch, saucy, merry, kindly, dreamy, fascinating, all in turn.

"I am awfully sorry that we should have kept you waiting, Miss Fitzgerald," I said; "I can't tell you how vexed I am."

"Then it is very silly of you to be vexed by such a trifle," she replied sweetly. "Besides, as I said before, you are new to uncle's little idiosyncrasies."

"We did not quite know how long it would take coming here, and our watches misled us. They had both got a fit of the slows."

"Like their masters? I suppose the fact of the matter was," said Nell, turning mischievously to Dicky, "Mr. Dawson required some time to beautify himself?"

Dicky smiled complacently.

"Do you consider I stand in need of so much adornment, Miss Fitzgerald?" he replied jestingly.

"No, not in the least," she returned, with feigned gravity. "In your case it is quite superfluous. *Such* an original," and she laughed as she said the words, "could not possibly be improved upon."

Although it was easy to see that Nell was only in fun, Dicky accepted the compliment in perfect good faith, and appeared highly gratified. It completely restored him to his accustomed state of self-esteem. I wondered how he could possibly be so obtuse; but there! some men's vanity blinds their eyes to the most patent facts. Perhaps Nell thought she had been a little hard upon him in the afternoon, and desired to make amends for her severity; or else—which I believe to have been the case—her natural instinct of hospitality rendered it an imperious necessity that she should promote the

happiness of her guests to the utmost of her ability. With her sharp insight into character, she had divined that Dicky loved flattery from the fair sex, and therefore in her own house she sought to adapt her conversation to his tastes, and choose those subjects calculated to please him best.

Our party consisted of Mr. Austen and his niece, Captain and Mrs. Hooper—the latter greeted me as an old friend—Dicky, and myself, and two (by courtesy) young ladies, the daughters of a neighbouring clergyman, who were arrayed in stiff, shiny black silks, small white “fichus”—that, I believe, is the correct word—and white cotton gloves. They appeared good, amiable girls, whose conversation was limited to parochial matters and the state of the weather.

“How cold it has been to-day,” the eldest one was saying to Captain Hooper.

“Yes, very,” replied that gentleman indifferently.

He seldom displayed much animation, except in the hunting-field.

“At one time I thought it looked like rain.”

“Oh! indeed.”

“The clouds got very black about two o’clock; but they cleared off towards the afternoon. The sun actually peeped through for a few minutes.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I shouldn’t wonder if we had a fine day to-morrow.”

“Hope so.”

The Captain was clearly not deeply interested.

“The glass is rising,” went on Miss Smithson, in her thin, monotonous voice. “It’s my belief we are in for a frost.”

But this suggestion was too much for Captain Hooper’s equanimity.

“Good Heavens!” he exclaimed, awaking from his state of languid boredom. “Don’t, pray, hint at such a thing.”

“A frost would be beneficial in many ways just now,” said Miss Smithson phlegmatically. “The farmers

require one for their land, and besides," winding up with a common platitude, "it's seasonable."

I had been talking to Mrs. Hooper, and was just wondering whether one of the Misses Smithson would fall to my lot, when the door opened, and a portly, grey-haired old butler, with a stately presence and stentorian voice, made the welcome announcement that dinner was ready.

Mr. Austen immediately rose and gave his arm to Mrs. Hooper, whereupon a slight confusion ensued as to who was to take in who. Nell went up to her uncle and asked for instructions. He whispered something in her ear which caused her to blush and smile. I fancied I caught the words:

"Baronet's son comes first—takes the lady of the house."

Then she turned to Captain Hooper, and with a little apologetic glance said:

"Will you take Miss Smithson in to dinner? Mr. Dawson," addressing Dick, "allow me to introduce you to Miss Mary Anne Smithson."

His face of disgust as he walked off with the fair Mary Anne was truly comical.

Nell and I were left alone.

"Captain Manington," she said, as half doubting my good fortune I still hung back, "will you have compassion upon my humble self?"

Imagine the delight that I felt when I found Nell assigned to my care.

"What luck," I said, offering her my arm with alacrity. "I could not realize it all at once, and made up my mind to one of the Misses Smithson and the weather."

"And had you so little confidence in your own powers of conversation, that you thought that subject would scarcely last through dinner?" said Nell archly.

"I confess I should have had misgivings, when no other resource remained but to fall back on the parish and mothers' meetings."

Nell put her finger to her lips.

"Hush!" she said laughingly. "You are too observant by far, and seem to have taken the measure of my poor friends in a very few minutes."

"I imagine the measure would not need to be long."

"Come, Captain Mannington, that's really quite naughty. I had no idea you were so sarcastic. I admit the young ladies under discussion are not fascinating, but they are good, worthy girls in their way."

"That is quite possible," I rejoined. "But can you tell me how it is, that 'good, worthy girls' are always so very, very uninteresting?"

Nell laughed.

"Ah!" she said, "you have knocked my little romance on the head altogether."

"Your little romance? I did not know that you had one."

"I thought Miss Smithson would do so admirably for you, and Miss Mary Anne for Mr. Dawson. I assure you they were invited from purely disinterested motives."

"Thanks, Miss Fitzgerald," I replied, "you are very kind; I am sorry my views do not fall in with yours."

"But Mr. Dawson?" she said merrily. "Don't you think Miss Mary Anne would suit him splendidly? He would smarten her up, and she would—well she would perhaps act as a check, and preach against the vanities of this wicked world."

"A very decided check," I said, laughing in spite of myself, for a more incongruous pair than the tall, bony Miss Mary Anne, and the festive, happy-go-lucky Dicky, it would be difficult to imagine.

Meanwhile we seated ourselves at table. Captain Hooper made for Nell's disengaged side. She was a great favourite of his. He liked any lady, so his wife confided to me, who was fond of sport, and talked about horses. Dicky, however, with his usual dexterity, and I almost with truth might add—impudence, contrived to slip in before the elder gentleman, who found himself forced to subside between the two Misses Smithson.

Nell did not appear to observe this manoeuvre, at all

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events she took no notice of it, but Mrs. Hooper as she glided into her place, at my other side, said with a meaning smile, full of comprehension :

"Your friend is very attentive."

Somehow or other the remark annoyed me.

"It is his way," I said coldly. "He is fond of ladies' society."

She looked at him critically.

"So I should imagine," she replied. "But not for its own sake."

She had hit the right nail on the head, but it was not for me to discuss Dicky's failings, more especially in such company as the present.

"He is a very good fellow," I said, "and most popular in his regiment."

"That may be," said my companion sceptically. "Men never know each other half so well as women do. Besides, most of you have two sides to your character."

"A good and a bad ?"

"Precisely. You show the good to your comrades, the bad to women. Therefore, I say, we know you best." And the cynical little woman, who seemed to believe in nothing and nobody except her Harry, cast a disapproving glance across the table at Dicky, who, just then, was stooping to pick up Nell's fan—with very unnecessary effusion.

I took a look round the room. There is a good deal to be gleaned from the environments of people one is interested in. They are a sure index to character. The dining-room at Cattington Towers was a fine, spacious apartment. Its oak-panelled walls were hung with costly family portraits. A beautiful Vandyke, representing a tall soldierly-looking man, in velvet doublet and ruffles, occupied the place of honour over the mantel-piece. Opposite to him was a Sir Joshua Reynolds, painted in the great master's happiest style. Quaint brass plates, of mediæval workmanship, occupied the spaces left by the pictures. A large Japanese screen, splendidly mounted and embroidered, stood

near the door by which we had entered, and a Persian carpet, of brilliant but harmonious colouring, covered the centre of the shining parquet floor. In a large bow window stood a tall and graceful palm, whose spreading green leaves contrasted, freshly and vividly, with their rich background of heavy crimson velvet.

The whole room bore evidence to the taste and refinement of its inmates.

The dinner table itself was faultlessly appointed. Snowy linen of the finest texture, beautiful glass, and massive silver goblets adorned the board, whilst last, but by no means least, came the flowers. I looked at them with considerable curiosity, knowing that they had been arranged by Nell's own hands. They, at least, would tell tales, since it is by such things a woman's nature is revealed. Had the combinations of colour been at variance, I own I should have felt disappointed. But when I looked at the low bank of cool, green moss, from whose velvety surface rose feathery sprays of maiden-hair fern, intermixed with clusters of pure white azaleas, relieved here and there by a few scarlet geraniums just to give a dash of warmth and colour to the general effect, my artistic sense was more than satisfied.

I glanced at Nell. How could I, even for one moment, have doubted her taste? Fair as were the flowers, she herself was infinitely fairer, and outshone them all.

"How pretty they are!" I said to her approvingly.

She seemed pleased at my praise.

"Do you think so?" she replied. "I am so glad that you like them."

"Nobody could fail to do so. One can tell at once that they are the work of a lady."

"I thought men always did everything better than women—at least in their own opinion!"

I looked at her.

"That is a very 'brassy' sentiment," I said significantly.

She blushed, knowing at once to what I referred.

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"When the flowers are left to a gardener," I observed, "there is always a certain stiffness about them: and but few people, in their position, understand the importance of keeping strictly to one, or at most two, key-notes of colour. They are given to jumbling up the blues, reds, yellows, greens and pinks, in the most indiscriminate manner."

"Ah!" said Nell, "I see you are a regular connoisseur! I had no idea you were so critical, or I should have taken more pains."

"The results could not possibly have been happier, Miss Fitzgerald. They tell me, at once, that you are fond of flowers. May I ask what is your favourite one?"

She hesitated a moment before replying, then she said:

"I used to like roses best, they are so fresh and sweet and beautiful. Somehow, they always remind me of a human life. First comes the bud, which gradually unfolds in the sunshine. That is the time of youth. Then the rose blows, and opens to the wind and the rain. And the wind and the rain come, and sweep over its fair bosom, and shake it to its very foundation. That," and Nell's voice softened, "is love. And by-and-by its glorious fresh leaves wither and droop, till at last they fall off one by one, and the poor heart is laid bare to the bleak blast. And that is disillusion, which leaves us old before our time, and numb and dead." She paused, but after a while resumed, in an altered tone, that lighter one which I had already observed she was wont to use, except upon rare occasions and moments of deep feeling. "But, now, I have forsaken my early love, and have grown more humble in my tastes."

"How is that?" I asked, trying to fall in with her moods, which I knew were subject to quick transition. "You are an exception to the majority of your sex. I have always been taught to believe that the ideas of most ladies expanded instead of becoming more simple."

"Do you not think, Captain Mannington, that, as a rule, we generally have some good reason for our likes and dislikes?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Very well. I owe the rose no grudge; but somebody I once esteemed very highly," and her expressive face changed, and I knew instinctively that she referred to that blackguard De Courcy, "used to give me violets. He sent me some when I was ill once, long ago, and, foolishly, I got to care for them for the sake of the giver. Can you understand that?" And she raised her eyes to mine.

"Yes, quite well."

"He, the giver," she continued, with a quaver in her voice not lost upon me, "was not what I thought. I fancied him good, and noble and true, but, above all—honest. He disappointed me. It was my fault, perhaps, for having formed such a ridiculously high ideal. It is a disagreeable thing for a man to be invested by some imaginative girl with qualities he does not possess. Sooner or later the awakening must come. And now all that remains," she concluded, with an effort at light-heartedness, "is my partiality for violets. There! Captain Mannington, do not ask me any more questions, for I shall not answer them. I do not know why, but they lead to fuller explanations than I ever dreamt of giving. You seem to have a curious power of making me speak the truth."

She was as proud as Lucifer, and no sooner did she reveal a little portion of her real self than she seemed to regret her confidences, and try to annul them by an extra levity or extra frigidity of manner. But I knew her secret, and so possessed the key-note to all her variations. And, moreover, I could understand them and sympathize with them. She resembled a poor hunted hare that, having once been driven from its form, doubles and twists in every direction, yet all the time pants for some convenient place of refuge in which to obtain safety.

CHAPTER XIX.

COME AGAIN, MY FRIEND

I FOUND it difficult to reply to Nell's last speech. I knew that she did not intend to be rude, and yet it was one scarcely calculated to promote conversation. Consequently, I felt positively grateful to Dicky, when, after addressing a few trite remarks to Miss Mary Anne Smithson, he devoted his attention to Nell, and soon succeeded in making her laugh by his criticisms on certain members of the Whinboro' Hunt, remarkable for their peculiarities.

"Who is the sportsman that comes out in the æsthetic costume?" he asked.

"That!" replied Nell. "Oh! he's a Mr. Algernon Lestrangle. An amateur poet, I believe, not that I have ever read any of his compositions. He comes from Littlehampton."

"I should have thought he came from Great-man's land."

"What do you mean, Mr. Dawson?"

"I mean that he seems to fancy himself so tremendously. That, however, appears a common failing in this part of the world."

Dicky was somewhat offended at not having been received with more open arms, and so lost no opportunity of delivering a Parthian thrust at the natives.

"Do you think so, Mr. Dawson?" said Nell, wickedly. "Judging from appearances I should have imagined that the people in your neighbourhood have likewise a tolerably good opinion of themselves."

The sarcasm was lost upon Dicky.

"I don't know who or what Mr. Algernon Lestrangle may be," he went on contemptuously, "but really, the fellow seems to imagine that the world is not big enough to contain him. I have no patience with such airs. I hope he is not a friend of yours, Miss Fitzgerald?"

"Oh! dear no; but you should be less critical, Mr

Dawson. For our own part, we rejoice in the fact that our little modest Whinboro' is capable of domiciling so great a personage as yourself. We all feel that we are vastly honoured by your presence among us."

But Nell's badinage was thrown away upon Dicky. He could see a joke fast enough at somebody else's expense, but he was singularly obtuse in perceiving them at his own. A common failing, incidental to human beings. On this occasion he was evidently determined on making himself agreeable to his hostess, and, although I had taken her in to dinner, appeared bent on cutting me out altogether. No doubt he thought it would be easy enough to eclipse me. He had never been in the habit hitherto of considering me as a rival, and I was pretty well accustomed to being thrown in the shade by the brilliant Dicky. Only to-night, somehow, I did not appreciate the process; especially when I found he kept Nell's attention so entirely engaged, that I did not get the chance of putting in a word. I felt like a dog whose bone, which he had carefully hidden and looked forward to enjoying, is stolen under his very nose. As for poor Miss Mary Anne, she was neglected in the most shameful way. I quite sympathized with her in her desertion; for it is not a pleasant thing for a woman, be she young or old, to find that her partner deliberately turns his back upon her, and prefers another. Such things should not be made too evident. Miss Mary Anne sat very bolt upright in her chair, and seemed dreadfully shocked by the levity of Dicky's conversation, portions of which she could not help overhearing. Every now and again she made a laudable effort to bring it back into more sober channels, by some such question as the following:

"Ahem! Mr. Dawson. What is your opinion of the present unfortunately divided state of the Church? Do you approve most of High or Low?"

"Eh? I beg your pardon. What were you saying, Miss Smithson?" said Dicky negligently, breaking off for a moment in his laughing jests with Nell.

The young lady repeated her demand with increased solemnity.

"Oh, High, by all means," said Dicky carelessly. "It's so much the most amusing of the two."

Miss Mary Anne gave a little gasp, expressive of unspeakable horror. She was appalled to find any species of religious service spoken of as "*amusing*."

"Is it not perfectly dreadful the way young men talk now-a-days?" she said, piously turning up the whites of her eyes, and addressing herself to Captain Hooper in hopes of finding a more congenial spirit. My ears were singularly sharp, and I possessed the faculty of being able to hear nearly all that went on at the same dinner-table; besides, Miss Smithson's voice was shrill and of very penetrating quality.

Captain Hooper was evidently a philosopher in his way. He had been out hunting all day, was blessed with an excellent appetite, and to all appearances an equable temper, which was not easily disturbed. Consequently, when he found himself doomed to sit between the two excellent but uninteresting Misses Smithson, he wisely resolved to make the best of things, and fall back upon a first-rate dinner, no mean substitute in adverse circumstances like the present.

"Never by any chance contradict an ugly, elderly female," he said to me later on in the evening whilst we were sitting over our wine. "It is a sure means of involving yourself in endless argument. One can stand a good deal from a pretty woman, but when they are both ancient and plain into the bargain, then if you are a wise man fight shy of them, and don't give them an opening. Always agree, no matter what nonsense they propound. It saves such a lot of trouble in the long run."

Acting upon this principle, when appealed to by Miss Smithson to confirm the depravity of the present generation, and young men in particular, he merely bowed his sleek, fair head resignedly, muttered an inarticulate "Oh! yes, dreadful. They are perfect monsters of iniquity;" and then applied himself with

additional vigour to the choice *entrée* of foie gras and truffle that had just been handed round.

Miss Mary Anne was forced to take refuge in a severe and protesting silence.

I could not help smiling at the expression of her countenance, which would have done honour to a hired mourner at a funeral.

"Did you ever see two such wet blankets?" whispered Mrs. Hooper in my ear. "I can't think how Nell can stand them."

"Who are they?" I replied in an undertone.

"Two clergyman's daughters from a neighbouring parish. Is not Harry splendid?"

"First rate. His impenetrability is most amusing, and has succeeded in quite nonplussing poor Miss Smithson. But why does Miss Fitzgerald ask such people?"

"Nell? Oh! she is good nature itself. They lead dreadfully dull lives, poor things, and although you would not think it to see them, they enjoy dining out more than anything in the world. An evening at the Towers furnishes them with conversation amongst their parishioners for the next six months to come. I couldn't be as nice as Nell to such dummies, but she is always kind to every one."

"I should think it was her nature," I remarked.

"She says that the only good of trouble is to make you feel for others. And certainly, since her own misfortunes, she has grown wonderfully considerate. All the old folks about here literally worship her."

"That I can quite understand. She is very charming."

"You and she have made friends already, I hear," said Mrs. Hooper, in her lively, vivacious style. "Nell tells me you rode some time together to-day."

"Yes; we happened to be companions in misfortune, and Miss Fitzgerald was good enough to take compassion on a stranger and constitute herself his pilot."

"You could not have a better one. She knows the country thoroughly."

"So I discovered. She has a wonderfully good eye to hounds."

"Yes; Harry always says he knows no lady her equal in that respect."

"She is marvellously quick," I returned.

"And did you enjoy your ride, Captain Mannington?"

"Very much, Mrs. Hooper."

"Shall I confess a confidence?" said she mischievously, with a bright glance at Nell, who, quite unsuspecting that she was the object of our remarks, continued talking merrily to Dicky.

"Are you justified in doing so?" I asked.

"Yes, I think so. She would not mind."

"She? Do you mean Miss Fitzgerald?"

Mrs. Hooper nodded her head.

"Nell said something about you, Captain Mannington, that pleased me very much."

"About me? What could it possibly be?"

Of course my curiosity was immediately aroused, and silenced any scruples as to permitting a speech to be repeated that doubtless was not intended for my ears.

"Whilst we were sitting talking before dinner," whispered my companion, "Nell said she really believed she had come across an honest man at last. There," and Mrs. Hooper looked at me with her piercing but friendly black eyes, "what do you say to that?"

"Naturally I feel flattered by Miss Fitzgerald's good opinion, and only wish I deserved it. I will try to do so at any rate."

"I was quite astonished," went on Mrs. Hooper, communicatively. "She so seldom says a word in favour of a man. You seem to me to have done her good already."

"Me? How could I?"

"By destroying her cynicism and making her believe in human nature."

"I am afraid, Mrs. Hooper, that you give me credit for greater influence than I possess."

"I do not think so. Remember I know Nell very intimately. We are almost like sisters; and she would not have said what she did unless she meant it. Now your friend over there," glancing at Dicky, "would never gain her approval."

"It looks as if he had gained it already," I returned, letting my eyes rest on the two handsome heads, as they bent over the *menu* together, more closely than I liked.

"Outward appearances count for nothing," said Mrs. Hooper sententiously, apparently divining my thoughts.

"You speak confidently," I said with a sigh, for the merrier seemed the pair, the soberer and graver grew I, and the less inclined to converse.

"I speak from positive knowledge. When Nell was talking about you, I asked her how she liked Mr. Dawson."

"Well," I said, with tell-tale anxiety, "what answer did she make?"

"She merely shrugged her shoulders and said—'Mr. Dawson? Oh! I have not thought about him one way or the other. He is like all the rest.' And," concluded Mrs. Hooper, significantly, "I knew what that meant."

The conversation had reached a deeply interesting point, but somehow or other I did not feel justified in continuing it. It seemed to me that if Nell knew her artless confidences were being betrayed, even by a friend and well-wisher, she would not be pleased. Certainly Mrs. Hooper's assurances were satisfactory as far as they went, but I placed more faith in ocular observations than in second-hand statements. And as the dinner progressed my spirits grew lower and lower. A fit of shyness seized me.

Did Nell also feel embarrassed and regret her overtures of friendship, imagining that they had been too hastily made? It was possible.

Once or twice I fancied that she purposely avoided me, that her eyes refused to meet mine, and that she rattled away to Dicky in order to prevent my returning

to any more serious subjects. Even Mrs. Hooper could not succeed in rousing me from my state of dejection.

"What is the matter with you, to-night?" she said; "you are not the least like yourself."

"I must apologize for being so stupid," I replied; "but the fact is, I have not quite recovered from the fall I had. My head still feels dizzy and heavy."

The little woman was good-natured. The excuse sufficed, and she had the tact and delicacy to leave me alone, devoting herself for the remainder of the meal to Mr. Austen, who seemed to enjoy her bright and lively sallies. At length the ladies rose. I rushed to the door in hopes of getting one glance from Nell. Alas! she swept out of the room like a young queen, and never bestowed a single look upon her devoted admirer. I asked myself what I could possibly have done to offend her. Could she be annoyed because I had enquired the name of her favourite flower? The question was such a very ordinary one, and had she resented it as being too curious she need not have voluntarily given so full an explanation. I must seek to make amends later on, and at least find out the cause of my disgrace.

Thus thinking, I returned with a heavy heart to my seat at the table, and poured myself out a glass of Mr. Austen's silky after-dinner claret. Dicky and Captain Hooper were already deep in a sporting argument as to whether Cormorant carried eight stone eight or eight stone ten to victory in the Cesarewitch, five years ago. The memory of neither was sufficiently accurate to remember so important a matter.

Mr. Austen commenced a political discussion with me, which he entered into with such interest that he was loth to discontinue it, even when we rose to join the ladies in the drawing-room. Our foreign policy incensed him highly. He was a staunch Conservative of the good old school, whilst I, although far from being a Radical, was more liberal in my views.

"By Jove!" exclaimed my host indignantly, button-holing me up in a corner and effectually preventing me from occupying the vacant seat by Nell's side for which

I had been craftily making, "it's simply disgraceful the way public matters are conducted now-a-days. England has completely lost her prestige. She is going down-hill just as fast as she can. Why, would you believe it, Captain Mannington? they tell me Englishmen are insulted, yes," raising his voice, "positively *insulted* in the streets of Paris. They cry out *lâches* after them as they go along. Things have changed sadly since poor old Palmerston's, or even since Disraeli's, time. The present Government shilly-shally. They take refuge in such empty words as humanity, economy, and so on. They grasp at the shadow and lose the substance. Look at Egypt, sir. A bold policy would have secured it to us for ever. Look at our wars in Zululand, South Africa and the Soudan. We have wasted money and men, with what result? Absolutely none. Upon my word, it's perfectly sickening." And the dear old gentleman grew red in the face and puffed and fumed with righteous indignation.

"We haven't gained much certainly," I admitted.

"Gained? We have lost. We have lost our good name, thanks to these odious Home-rulers and Radicals."

"And yet, Mr. Austen," I said, "I do not quite see how it is possible to contend against the great democratic wave, setting in, not only over England, but over the whole of Europe. Nations, like individuals, pass through crises, and sooner or later it seems to me inevitable that power must fall into the hands of the people. Now-a-days the 'what-I've-got-I'll-keep' system of the ancient Conservative party no longer holds good. One must march with the times, however unwilling one may be to do so. Progress, not stagnation, is the law of the world."

"It depends upon what you call progress," objected Mr. Austen.

"As long as the masses remained ignorant, they were more or less indifferent to their form of government; but now that you have granted them education, it is only natural that they should begin to wake up,

and take an interest in the affairs of the nation. After all it is a great anomaly why a small body of nobility and country gentlemen should expect to suppress the dawning intelligence of several millions of their fellow creatures."

"That is true in a way," said Mr. Austen, "and it is not the people I quarrel with, for I maintain, good Conservative as I am, that if the honour of the British Nation were entrusted to the bulk of the sober, hard-working, respectable public, it would be perfectly safe."

"I am inclined to agree with you there."

"*They* would not lower the great English name and drag it in the dust," continued Mr. Austen with increasing animation; "but we have to thank this new school of fanciful, imaginative, philanthropic and visionary enthusiasts for all our national misfortunes. Men, who possess in a rare degree the faculty of self-deception, who see things merely from their own perverted point of view, and who lack that happy mixture of courage, self-reliance and straight-forwardness essential to every true patriot, and really able politician. These are the men who have murdered Gordon, who have alienated our allies, embittered our foes, involved us in endless complications, and made us the laughing-stock of Europe."

"We have gone down in the world since Waterloo, certainly."

"Gone down, my dear sir? I should rather think we had. Waterloo was the pinnacle of our military glory. It has declined steadily ever since. In former days we fought, and placed our trust in British pluck and British bayonets, but now, if an insult is offered to our flag, what do we do?"—and Mr. Austen's lip curled with contempt—"We apologize!"

He was evidently so charmed to find some one with whom he could discuss the political situation, that I could not with courtesy put an end to the conversation, which lasted uninterruptedly until the butler again appeared, to inform us that our vehicle was at the door. All this time I had the mortification of seeing

Dicky usurp the place which I had intended should be mine. He continued to monopolize Nell, and I felt almost vexed with her for allowing him to pay her so much attention.

The Misses Smithson were seated up in the corner, knitting as if for their lives. Captain Hooper was stretching his long legs in the arm-chair and, encouraged by the gentle heat of the fire, was nearly asleep, whilst Mrs. Hooper turned over the leaves of an album, and occasionally made some remark to Nell.

Profiting by the first pause, I made a move. I had looked forward to this evening with keen pleasure, but I had not enjoyed it nearly as much as I had expected. Everything seemed to have gone wrong, and, in spite of the injustice, I felt ready to horsewhip Dicky. How contemptible a man rendered himself when he made up to a girl, as he was making up to Nell, and how strange it was, girls were so dense at seeing through their real motives.

"Good-bye, Mr. Austen," I said. "We must resume our conversation on some future occasion."

"Good-bye, my dear Mannington," he replied, with the utmost cordiality. "You are a good Conservative at heart, in spite of your professed Liberalism."

"Perhaps you are right," I said, with a smile. "The real thing is, there is very little difference between the parties now-a-days."

"Well, you must come again soon, and we will talk it all over. It's quite a relief to meet with somebody who can converse on some sensible subject. People about here seldom get beyond hunting and hounds."

Having made my adieux I crossed over to where Nell was sitting, and Dicky, seeing that I was determined to depart, reluctantly rose from his seat. Whilst he was bidding Mrs. Hooper good-bye, I had an opportunity of saying a few words to Nell; and yet I had waited so long that speech did not come very readily.

As usual, I made a bungling remark.

"You seem to have been very merry," I said. "I

hope Mr. Dawson has been making himself agreeable?"

Oh! what a mean passion jealousy is. And yet, when we love and doubt as well, how readily it rises to the surface.

"Exceedingly so," she replied. "I had no idea he was so entertaining."

"Good-night," I said hurriedly, as she held out her little hand. "We must be going."

"You seem very anxious to be off."

"It is getting late, and we are keeping you up. You have been out hunting to-day, and although you won't admit it, I know you are tired."

She raised her bright dark eyes to mine, and looked me straight in the face.

"It is good of you to think of such things," she said. "Most men would not."

"I cannot help thinking of them where you are concerned."

Her fingers closed round mine in a gentle pressure that made my heart beat wildly.

"I am afraid you have not enjoyed yourself this evening," she said penitently, "and it has been partly my fault."

I felt ashamed of my ill-humour, more especially that she should have noticed it. Was it sympathy that made her so quick?

"Please don't say such a thing," I said. "You never could be to blame."

She smiled and shook her head.

"Before you go," she said, "I want to thank you for having been so good to uncle. It is such a pleasure to him to talk politics, and he very seldom gets any one here, except me, with whom to discuss them. But I know it has bored you a little."

"It did not bore me at all," I answered. "Your uncle is a very clever, intelligent man, only——"

And I hesitated.

"Yes?" looking up at me with questioning eyes.

"I would have preferred talking to you. There, the murder is out."

"You shall do that some other day. In the meantime, my friend, thank you for having been kind to uncle."

All my ill-humour vanished. These few prettily-spoken words of thanks rewarded me for my previous disappointments. Besides, she had called me her friend, proving that she did not regret our compact of the morning. My pulses thrilled with joy.

"When shall I see you again?" I said in a low voice.

"On Monday. I am going to ride Sweetheart out hunting, but," echoing Mr. Austen's words, "you must be sure and come again soon; uncle will always be pleased to see you."

I cannot tell what impulse possessed me. I stooped my head until it almost touched hers, and I could feel her sweet breath upon my face.

"And will you?"

I trembled at my own audacity.

"Yes, I shall be pleased too, friend," and she turned away as she spoke.

How inconsistent we are. The first time she called me by that name it filled my whole being with an insidious joy, now it seemed suddenly to cast a chill upon my heart.

Friend? Yes, I was her friend and nothing more. She could conceive of me in no other light, and although one tiny word or glance from her sufficed to set my blood in a tumult, I was absolutely powerless to affect her in return.

As I drove home and looked out at the peaceful night, at the cold clear stars and restful dark blue sky, a tempest raged within me, strangely at variance with the great hushed calm of the silent earth. Nature seemed to scoff at my tumultuous passions. She so vast—I so small; she so quiet and tranquil—I so full of doubt and turmoil.

Ah! would Nell ever be brought to feel what I felt?

Would a time ever come when she would think of me by day and by night as I thought of her?

Nell! Nell! I loved you honestly and truly. Surely it is something to inspire such a passion. It deserves some slight return. And I would be so good to you, that, in time, you must get to care for me a little. A woman cannot remain insensible to a man's undivided devotion. In process of years it must make some impression.

Ah! dreams, empty dreams. Love cannot be coerced. It is a divine passion that has a mysterious birth, and sometimes a still more mysterious ending.

"Miss F. was in awfully good form to-night," observed Dicky, as we rolled along under the starry heavens.

"Was she?" I replied; "I did not speak much to her."

Oh, my God! It was hard to bear; yet, if she preferred this man to me, he should never guess at my feelings. I knew myself honestest than he, but if she loved him I would not throw obstacles in her way.

Only, as I listened to him, flowing on in his light, self-satisfied fashion—I asked myself could he make such a girl as Nell happy?

I doubted it.

I doubted whether the fine clay of her sensitive nature would mingle well with the common, every-day mould of this absorbing egotism.

Not that I thought myself better than Dicky; I only knew that my love for Nell was very different from his. Purer, deeper, and less calculating.

CHAPTER XX.

"THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER."

MORE than a month passed away, and I lived in a state of perpetual excitement; sometimes fancying that

every now and again Nell began to display a slight partiality for me, at others, plunged in the very depths of despair by the imagined coolness of her manner. I grew feverish, restless, and irritable, took long solitary walks on the non-hunting days, and as much as possible avoided Dicky's society. Whilst I hesitated and trembled, he was making steady running, and never lost an opportunity of ingratiating himself with Nell.

Whenever she came out hunting, and appeared at the meet, he immediately went up to greet her, and whilst we were jogging from covert to covert seldom left her side. So constantly were they together that people began to make remarks, and to couple their names in that mysterious, half-whispered manner which usually precedes an engagement.

"I can't think what Nell is about, to allow Mr. Dawson's attentions," said Mrs. Hooper to me, impatiently, one afternoon, when I went to call there.

"I suppose she likes them," I replied, as calmly as I could.

"I don't believe it. I remonstrated with her the other day, and told her folks would talk if she didn't take care, and what answer do you think she gave?"

"I can't guess."

"She said Mr. Dawson was an amusing little boy, and she looked upon him as quite a child, nothing more."

"'Nell,' I said, 'you are a great goose. Don't you know that children are apt to be very precocious at times?'"

Such conversations as these did not tend, however, to conduce to my peace of mind. I persuaded myself that Nell cared more for Dicky than she chose to own, and was merely trying to throw dust in Mrs. Hooper's eyes.

My only grain of comfort was, that although she rode with Dicky willingly enough whilst hounds were not running, directly we seemed in for a really good "thing," she deserted him, and selected me as a pilot

in his place. Whether she thought I rode the harder and straighter of the two, I know not; but I felt flattered by her preference, even although shown in so small a matter.

On one occasion, too, she said to me in her most winning manner: "Do you mind my following you, Captain Mannington?"

"No, not at all," I replied with truth. "Only it makes me more cautious as to what I go at, when I know you are coming after me."

"That is a good thing," she said, sedately. "You are far too reckless, and require some slight restraint put upon your valour. I know, however, how greatly most men dislike being pursued by a lady in the hunting field."

"I did not say that, Miss Fitzgerald."

"No, you would not be so rude. But shall I tell you why I like following you?"

I nodded my head by way of answer.

"Because I feel certain that if I came to grief you would not mind picking me up and looking after me."

"Any man would do the same."

"Well, they might and they might not," responded Nell. "But most of them would talk of it afterwards, and imply that you were a bore, and had lost them their run."

"A bore!" I exclaimed indignantly. "What a name to apply to yourself!"

"And why not?"

"Just as if you ever could be one, under any circumstances."

"Well, you know it is quite true what I say. The majority of my male acquaintances are exceedingly kind, and no doubt, in case of emergency, would offer me every assistance in their power; but, if you understand what I mean, they would all the time *feel* that they were losing a great deal by helping a lady in distress, whereas you—" and she glanced at me from under her soft, long eyelashes—"you would never think about the thing at all, or be conscious of your

own self-sacrifices, but just help a woman as a matter of course, because she was weaker and less independent than yourself."

"I hope so, Miss Fitzgerald. I should think but meanly of myself otherwise."

"And I maintain," returned Nell, vivaciously, "that there are very few such men in the hunting field; therefore, in my selfishness, I cling to one with whom I feel safe."

Her words sent a thrill of pleasure through my frame. This was a red-letter day. One on which I fancied she did care a little bit for me after all.

"And do you really feel safe with me?" I asked in accents of pride.

"Yes, I do. It's very odd, is it not?" And she smiled up into my face.

"Very," I rejoined, with an answering smile, for a little talk like this made me feel, oh! so happy; "but I hope you may never come to grief as you call it. Sweetheart is far too much of a gentleman to mis-demean himself so grievously."

"Is he not a wonderful animal?" said Nell, stooping forward and patting her favourite's firm, glossy neck, as he rounded it beneath the light touch of her bridle-hand, and played daintily with his bit.

"Do you know that I have ridden him for three seasons——"

"And uncommonly hard, too, judging from what I have seen," I interrupted.

"Without his ever giving me a single fall, or indeed putting a wrong foot," concluded Nell, triumphantly.

"That is saying a great deal," I replied.

"The only thing is," said my companion, pensively, "such absolute perfection spoils one for riding any other animal. They are all so immeasurably inferior. Father Christmas,"—that was the name of the white cob she had bought from Captain Hooper—"is a very good little beast in his way, but he seems like a cart-horse after Sweetheart."

"I wish I were Sweetheart," I muttered, *sotto voce*,

"for you to be so fond of me." Then aloud, "What would you do without your paragon, Miss Fitzgerald?"

"I—?" and she changed colour at the very thought. "Oh! don't talk of such a thing."

She remained silent for a minute, then resumed in an explanatory tone:

"I am a very strange person in some ways, Captain Mannington."

"Are you? I have not discovered, as yet, wherein your strangeness consists."

"I attach myself to remarkably few things and to still fewer people; but, unfortunately for my own peace of mind, when I do it lasts for life. I never forget my old affections, worse luck." And she sighed.

"Never?" I asked, echoing her sigh. "Not even when you find you have been both deceived and disappointed? Your memory must indeed be tenacious."

"It is," replied Nell. "I may alter my opinion, but," and she suddenly blushed crimson, "I cannot forget those I once loved. I only wish I could. It would be far better, when reason, facts, common-sense all tell you they are unworthy of your remembrance. The moral is that it is a great mistake to care too much for anything in this world. Sorrow invariably comes of great love."

And then when she had spoken in this way—which she often did when we were alone, for the conversation nearly always ended by taking a melancholy turn—I would go home with despair tearing at my heart-strings. Would she never banish from her thoughts the scoundrel who had so effectually cast a shadow on her young life, and blighted all its opening promise? Other girls get over these things quickly enough, why not she? Why should her deeply sensitive and loyal nature be tortured by reminiscences of the Past? Such love was indeed a treasure worth the gaining, yet, while I would willingly shed the last drop of my life's blood to win it, De Courcy had held it as valueless.

Meanwhile I steadily gained favour with Mr. Austen, and if the niece had only been as kind as was the uncle

I might have gathered hope. He asked us frequently over to the Towers, and many a time when he was in Whinboro' looked us up at the "Horse and Hound." Dicky he treated politely but ceremoniously, but he seemed to view me with quite a fatherly regard, and the liking which I entertained for him appeared mutual.

Things were in this state when the long threatened frost set in with a vengeance. We swore at it after the manner of hunting men, loafed about the stables, and made vague plans as to running up to town and seeing the Pantomimes; but we took so long in discussing them that they never came to anything, and when an invitation arrived from Mr. Austen to go and skate at Cattington Towers, Dicky professed himself perfectly contented to stay where he was, and was actually unsportsmanlike enough to affirm, that he shouldn't wonder if the frost turned out a blessing in disguise. "It gives one such awfully good opportunities," he declared.

"Of what?" I enquired drily.

"Of flirtation, old chap. I shall force the pace a bit with Miss F."

This "blessed" frost lasted nearly a fortnight. All the ponds were frozen over quite hard, and the roads were so slippery that the over-fed hunters were reduced to straw-rings, round which they could be seen monotonously trotting every morning, whilst the breath from their nostrils formed in clouds of vapour on the chilly air. As one looked at them it was a melancholy reflection to think that our leave was slipping away, and that we were now taxing our slender resources without any compensating equivalent in the way of sport.

The finest sheet of water—or rather ice—for miles around was the one belonging to Mr. Austen in the park of Cattington Towers, and he kindly gave us leave to skate on it whenever we liked. Of this permission we availed ourselves every day, especially when once we had discovered that Nell was in the habit of coming

out about eleven and skating a couple of hours or so before lunch. She was a graceful and accomplished skater, and delighted in the exercise. She skimmed along the frozen surface with a confidence and ease that filled me with admiration. Wearing a little fur hat on her pretty head, her sweet face glowing, and her eyes sparkling like two stars, she looked perfectly bewitching. And so Master Dicky seemed to think; for if he had been assiduous in his attentions in the hunting field he was doubly so now, when far less liable to interruptions. The merry sound of their voices could often be heard travelling on the still air, as the couple pirouetted in company, or else, hand-in-hand, glided swiftly up and down the mere.

All this was simply unbearable to me, since I could not skate, and thus was debarred from joining in their amusement. As a matter of course I no doubt pictured the enjoyment greater than it really was, and imagined Dicky had proposed half-a-dozen times over. Meanwhile Mr. Austen and I amused ourselves as best we could, walking about the grounds, discussing the political situation, going to see the horses, and taking a look now and then at the skaters. It was too cold to stand still for long, and though I would gladly have done so in order not to lose sight of Nell, Mr. Austen felt afraid of remaining inactive. So, whilst we promenaded the shrubberies and garden, Dicky was making love, or, to use his own expressive language, "Forcing the pace."

I formed many a secret resolution to lose no time in learning to skate; but although Nell pressed me to do so on several occasions, a species of false pride held me back. I believe I was afraid of appearing ridiculous in her eyes, if I fell sprawling to the ground in all sorts of awkward attitudes, and that she would inevitably contrast my clumsiness with Dicky's grace and skill. Now and again she came waltzing up to us like a fairy, her cheeks rosy as a newly-awakened child's, and asked us how we were getting on; but I never once had the chance of a private conversation. Now, it is a curious

thing that, until you grow fond of a person you never care two straws whether you are alone with them or not. Their absence or presence is a matter of such perfect indifference that it does not enter your head to think about it one way or the other; but from the instant your affections become engaged, the one aim and object of your life is to secure a *tête-à-tête* with the loved being. She may be ever so kindly and gracious, but when her remarks are uttered in the presence of a third person you fail to derive any satisfaction from them. It seems as if a check were put on your free intercourse, and the heart still remains hungry and discontented.

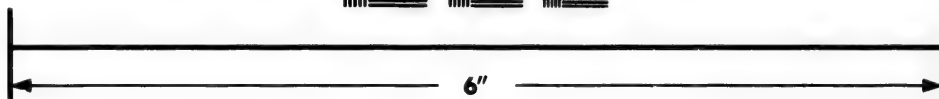
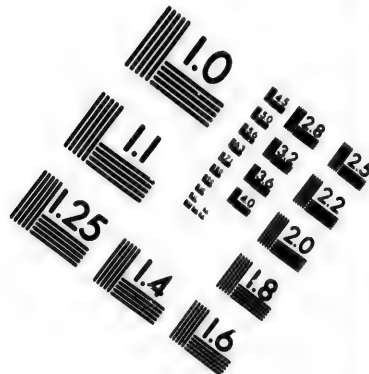
So it was now with me; for although we frequently stayed to lunch, and I saw Nell nearly every day, I felt as if I were making no progress, and would much rather have had the pleasure of leading her over half-a-dozen fences out hunting, and hearing her joyous exclamations of pleasure when Sweetheart successfully negotiated some unusually big obstacle, than be in her company day after day and realize that another was usurping my place in her friendship. For I could no longer shut my eyes to the fact that she preferred Dicky to me. She would chat away to him, and laugh and jest, but of late she had been curiously shy and quiet when in my presence, and that she should be so, grieved me more than words can tell.

I daily returned from these skating expeditions, which I had not the courage to forego altogether, with an increasing sense of disappointment and depression.

It was quite otherwise as far as Dicky was concerned. His spirits improved as mine grew more and more dejected, and I could see that each day tended to heighten his confidence.

One evening we were both sitting over the fire, puffing tranquilly at our pipes, and enveloped in tobacco smoke. Conversation had been rather difficult between us of late, and after discussing one or two indifferent matters we had relapsed into a solemn silence. Dicky was the first to break it.





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"Miles, old chap," he said determinedly, "I shall pop the question soon."

"What!" And I started as if I had been shot.

"I shall pop the question before very much longer," he repeated, rather pleased than otherwise at my surprise. "It is no good beating about the bush, and things are well *en train*, as our neighbours over the water say."

My heart beat so wildly at this announcement, that for a few moments I could not make any reply. After all, what right had I to express my disapprobation? He was but seeking to obtain that which I myself so sorely coveted. Hence my extreme dislike to the subject being mentioned. And was I not unreasonable in my opposition? It could do no good, since the decision lay with Nell. It was for her to choose between us, possibly to reject both. Nevertheless a pang shot through me, as I heard Dicky's openly avowed intention.

"You must do as you like," I said with forced calm. "No doubt you know best what Miss Fitzgerald's sentiments are."

"I think she's all right," answered my companion sanguinely. "Besides which, you see, Miles, time is getting on. Six weeks of our leave are up already, and I should like the affair settled one way or the other, so that I can make my plans accordingly."

"Yes, I suppose so. It would be more convenient certainly."

I felt like an automaton, and spoke as a clock-work creature, that performs its duty mechanically. Even now, I could hardly realize that the crisis was so close at hand.

"Of course, if it comes off," continued Dicky decidedly, "I should not dream of going to India."

"Wouldn't you?"

How curiously my voice sounded in my ears. So cold and hard and constrained, that I scarcely recognized it as being my own. Somehow or other, at this

moment my agony seemed to have reached a culminating point.

"No," said Dicky. "I should sell out at once, marry as soon as I decently could, and settle down as a respectable county magnate. Nell likes country life and so do I."

"That's lucky."

"Very, but I am easily pleased. I am always contented, wherever I am."

"Yes," I rejoined with biting irony, "so long as you get the best of everything. Most people are contented under such circumstances."

"More fools they to put up with less," returned Dicky good-humouredly.

"And may I ask, just as a matter of curiosity, when you propose acquainting Miss Fitzgerald with your sentiments?"

He took a slow, steady, meditative pull at his pipe.

"Well!" he said, after a bit, "that depends a good deal upon how things go on. I have not quite made up my mind, but if matters look prosperous, as they do now, I don't see why I should not take advantage of this hunt ball that takes place in Whinboro' next week."

"Is she going to it?"

"Oh! yes, of course. She was speaking to me about it to-day, and saying we must be sure and honour the festivity with our presence. There are certain to be some good sitting-out corners in a ball room, besides which lights, music, dancing, and all that sort of thing, always tell with the women."

"How would you like me to give Miss Fitzgerald warning of the great compliment in store for her?" I asked sarcastically.

Dicky got up from his arm-chair, and lifting his coat tails, proceeded to warm himself before the fire.

"I don't think it necessary, old chap," he said seriously. "And if you wish to please me, you could not possibly do so better than by behaving exactly as you have done lately."

"Indeed! I am glad to hear my conduct has met with your approbation."

"Could not have been more delicate, my dear fellow. You play gooseberry to perfection, and keep the uncle admirably engaged, whilst I make love to the niece. By Jove! I owe you a world of thanks."

I felt a kind of white heat spreading all over my frame.

"So you confess to making love to the niece, do you?" I asked in a voice of suppressed passion.

"Yes," said Dicky, candidly; "why shouldn't I?"

"Oh, no reason whatever. Have you any objection to stating how the young lady receives your amorous advances?"

"Not in the least, since you are good enough to display such interest in my affairs. She rather seems to like them."

And as he spoke Dicky turned, and deliberately inspected his handsome features in the glass over the mantel-piece.

"Upon my word, Miles," he said complacently, "we shall be a rather good-looking couple, shan't we?"

"We? Who?" I enquired, pretending ignorance, for his vanity disgusted me beyond measure.

"Why, Miss F. and me, of course. To put it plainer, Mr. and Mrs. Richard Dawson," giving a self-satisfied twirl to his fair moustache.

I could endure this torture no longer. The only redeeming point about it was, that my companion had no idea of the martyrdom I was undergoing. He was so full of his own hopes and expectations that he had little attention to bestow on any one else.

"Look here, Dicky," I said, rising from my seat and beginning to pace tempestuously up and down the room, making it shake with my angry strides. "Do exactly as you like, and propose when you like, but for goodness' sake don't let me hear another word about the concern until you are either rejected or accepted. Then come to me to be condoled with or congratulated, as the case may be. As for playing gooseberry to your

courting, I tell you honestly I have not done so from good-nature as you seem to think. The part has been forced upon me, much against my will."

So saying, I went out of the room, and tried to cool my burning head and throbbing pulses by a midnight stroll up and down the frosty streets of Whinboro'.

In vain !

A very tumult of agonizing thoughts made chaos of my brain. It seemed like a seething whirlpool of revolving matter.

I had talked of warning Nell. Would it be well for me to do so? Would it be well even now, at the eleventh hour, to tell Dicky her history, and trust to his good sense to prevent him from taking the step he proposed ?

No, deep down in my innermost heart a secret voice told me that were I to do so it would be but the result of jealousy, of that wild, insensate passion, which was rapidly transforming my better nature into evil, and rendering it capable of mean, base actions.

The fair moon shone down upon me ; poor struggling mortal that I was.

Her soft light seemed to dwell tenderly upon my stricken frame, as if it fain would hush to rest all the wild achings, and strivings, and longings, battling within my bosom.

She whispered that such fierce anger and despair were unrighteous. She told me of the pettiness of human passion. How little impress it makes on the great sands of Time, and how our loves, and griefs, and joys, are of no account when compared with the vast and mysterious universe.

Shame took possession of me. The calm of Nature penetrated my being, and made me blush for my own unworthiness.

Yes, Fate is stronger than that puny thing called man. She coerces him with her slow, resistless force, and events must ever take their course. We fancy we control *them*, but *they* control us.

I had been weak, wicked, mad, but now I would try

and be strong, and if the worst came to the worst banish Nell from my heart !

I had not prayed for many years. Grown-up men, when they go out into the world, are apt to lose the habit, acquired at their mother's knee. But now, as I walked along under the frosty heavens, and felt the cool night wind kissing my hot cheeks, whilst the glittering stars shone overhead with their pale, celestial radiance, my whole soul softened, and I offered up a silent prayer for strength and resignation.

All at once it flashed upon me, that, for days past, I had been thinking too much of myself, of my personal wants and desires. Now, I would place my lot in His hands, and abide by the result.

And thus resolving, by degrees my angry passions died away. The fierce conflict within my breast ceased, and in its place glided a holy calm. If Nell preferred another, I would try and bear it like a man.

That night when I fell asleep I dreamt of my mother in Heaven. She seemed to smile approval on me, and as she smiled a great peace filled my being.

CHAPTER XXI.

IN FOR A RUN

WHEN I opened my eyes next morning, I found that a complete change of weather had taken place. A rapid thaw, accompanied by a soft, persistent down-pour, altogether altered the aspect of affairs. The High Street of Whinboro', which for many days past had been frozen quite hard and white, and was covered by a slight sprinkling of firm snow, was now converted into a state of moist, muddy slush, exceedingly flattering to the fox-hunter's hopes.

For four-and-twenty hours did the rain continue without intermission, and at the end of that time a welcome message came over from the kennels, intimat-

ing to all subscribers of the Whinboro' Hunt that the hounds would meet at Burton Cross Roads, five miles from the town, at twelve o'clock.

The ground, although wet on the surface, was still hard underneath, owing to the severity of the frost; but the snow that had fallen had been of great service as a protection, and every hour made an astonishing difference in the "going."

I, for one, rejoiced immensely at the change of temperature, and, in his heart of hearts, I believe Dicky did the same, although he would not openly own to it.

As a matter of course, we elected to ride our best horses; consequently he chose the Lothario gelding, and I The Siren. The latter seemed greatly benefited by her fortnight's rest. She had actually put on flesh; her appetite, so Martingale assured me, had much improved, and she was as fresh as a kitten. When I got on her back, and turned her head away from the stable-yard, she gave a little squeal of pleasure, and bounded high into the air out of pure light-heartedness.

"She seems fit and well, Martingale," I observed to that gentleman.

"She's ready to run for her life," he responded in a satisfied tone.

The day was a mild and genial one, offering an utter contrast to those which had preceded it. Scarcely a breath of wind stirred the tops of the hedgerows as we rode past them. The pale sun, breaking gently through a bank of misty cloud, shone radiantly out, and illumined with his magical beams the great heavy rain-drops hanging from each tiny blade of grass and sharp-pointed thorn, till they sparkled and twinkled like the costliest diamonds. The half-starved birds, thankful once more to be able to obtain a comparatively easy livelihood, raised their voices in grateful thanksgiving, as they flew busily from twig to twig, or else plumed their feathers in the sunshine. The soft fresh air felt doubly soft and doubly fresh, after the nipping winds which for the last fortnight had held the whole country frost-bound in their icy blasts. Even to see the green

fields again was a pleasure in itself, after becoming accustomed to their pall of white. To me, the world seemed fairer, brighter, more enjoyable than of late.

And when we got to the meet, every one appeared to be of the same way of thinking, and many were the congratulations exchanged as to the speedy and unexpected disappearance of the frost; for, however much people might profess to enjoy the pleasures of skating, it was quite evident that that pastime held a very different place in their hearts from the rightly termed "Sport of Kings."

A few minutes before twelve, the hounds, huntsman and whips made their appearance. Despite the idle time they had lately been having, the former looked in the pink of condition, reflecting great credit on their kennel huntsman. Captain Hooper, whose hopes of a good run were on this particular morning remarkably high, observed to me, that it was always an excellent sign when the beauties did not roll about on the grass, as if disinclined for anything but a regular lounge.

"I don't know why it is," he said confidentially, "but I have always noticed, that whenever hounds take to lolling on the turf, there is hardly ever a scent."

"I trust that we may have one to-day," I rejoined.

"Sure to," he returned sanguinely. "If it has done nothing else, this frost has at least purified the ground, but the 'going' is a bit slippery still."

"We shall forget about all that, directly we find a good straight-running fox. Such minor considerations will soon fade from our minds."

"By Jove! yes. I always find folks cry caution at the meet, and ride exactly as usual when they get warmed to their work. As for myself, I don't mind confessing that for once I feel as keen as mustard."

"And is not it your normal condition to be as 'keen as mustard,' Captain Hooper?" put in a clear feminine voice cheerily.

Turning round we perceived Nell, who with her uncle had just arrived.

"I don't know, Miss Fitzgerald," replied Captain Hooper laughingly, taking off his hat as he spoke.

"Don't you? I do then."

"I'm afraid I vary," he returned apologetically. "Some days I am in pretty fair form, and others I can't ride a yard. I would give a thousand pounds to possess the same nerve as I had when I was a boy."

"Come, come," exclaimed Nell banteringly. "It's all 'swagger' *your* talking about nerve as a desirable acquisition. Why, you do not even know the meaning of the word. But," and she glanced at me, "in my humble experience I have invariably found that the hardest riders are always the most modest as to their own performances. For one thing they are sure of them, and have no need to puff them up by personal glorification. When I hear a man trumpeting his deeds, somehow or other I doubt their existence except in his imagination."

"You are not far wrong," returned Captain Hooper with a smile.

"I suppose you and Captain Mannington will compete as usual for the honour of leading the field?" said Nell, archly.

"No, Miss Fitzgerald, we leave that distinction to you," he replied gallantly. "You have shown us your capability many a time."

Nell laughed.

"A truce to compliments," she said, airily, "more particularly as the hounds are just beginning to move on. You and I, Captain Hooper, have often discussed the subject; and have, long ago, agreed that flattery is out of place in the hunting field."

So saying, she trotted off at a brisk pace, whilst Mr. Austen called out after her—"Nell, Nell—now mind what I told you. Do pray be careful." Then he turned to me, and added: "Captain Mannington, I can depend upon you. If we should happen to have a good run, and I lose sight of this wilful girl, as, alas! I constantly do, when it comes to jumping, will you be

kind enough to look after her a bit, and prevent her from doing anything extra rash? They may say what they choose, about the ground being all right, but I don't half like it; and consider it is in a very unsafe and dangerous condition. The best horse in the world might slip, upon such a day as this."

I tried my utmost to allay his anxiety, promising to do all that lay in my power—and take every care of Miss Fitzgerald.

"Do you know that you have been placed in my charge for the day, and have to obey orders?" I said to her, playfully, a few minutes later, as, profiting by Dicky's momentary absence, I rode up along side.

"I?" she said. "By whose authority?"

"Your uncle's. He has begged me to see that you come to no harm; and so much do I sympathize with his fears, that I feel it my duty to instil caution into your too daring and adventurous mind."

"How about your own then?"

"Mine, Miss Fitzgerald, is not under discussion at the present moment. Besides, I do not suppose there is a person in the world who cares two straws whether I come to grief or not."

"Your father, surely he would mind?"

"My father," I answered, somewhat sadly—for his indifference was always a sore point with me—"does not greatly care for his eldest son. He does not consider he reflects much credit on his ancestors."

Nell was silent a minute, as if considering my last words.

"He is wrong there," she said presently. "Quite, quite wrong. Do you know, Captain Mannington, I don't think I should like your father."

"Oh, yes, you would. He is a very fine man; remarkably handsome; and his manners are said to be charming. All women like him."

"That may be—but he can't be nice; and, what's more," very decidedly, "I *hate* good-looking men. They always think such a lot of themselves. The ugly ones are far pleasanter."

"Thanks. May I take that as a personal compliment?"

She blushed, and looked much distressed.

"I—I—never said you were ugly; and, what's more," taking courage, and lifting her eyes bravely to mine, "I don't think it. Men ought not to be smooth and rosy, and pretty, like a woman."

During the above conversation we had been trotting down a narrow road, on our way to draw the nearest covert; but further talk was now put a stop to by a sudden halt, which brought the noses of the horses behind us on to the tails of those we ourselves were riding. To the right, was a large turnip field, separated from the road by a blind ditch and high fence. The hounds hesitated, and several of them began feathering down the hedge-row. The whips cracked their long lashes, and forcibly endeavoured to persuade them to proceed.

"Get along, Milkmaid. Forrard on, Silverbell," they cried, with rough admonition. But Milkmaid and Silverbell were wiser than their masters. They had winded an out-lying fox, and were determined to pursue him. Consequently, they crashed through the undergrowth of the hedge, first selecting a weak place, and thus setting the example to several of their companions. The huntsman—who rode at the head of the pack—paused, and looked back. At that moment old Milkmaid gave a whimper, full of significance. She was very busy in among the turnips, with her nose close to the ground, and her fine-pointed stern waving sagaciously from side to side. Silverbell joined her. The whimper passed from a whimper to a note of triumphant certainty, and in another minute the pair dashed forward, straight ahead.

Just then a loud "Tally-ho" from one of the whips, who had been sent on to prevent the hounds from straying too far, filled the air.

"By Jove! an out-lying fox!" exclaimed the huntsman. "What a nose that Milkmaid has, to be sure!"

So saying, with a cheery "View Holloa," he gathered

the remainder of the pack together, and, quick as lightning, taking his horse by the head, cleared the big upstanding fence that led into the turnip field. Captain Hooper immediately followed suit, though his young chestnut mare made the twigs fly.

"Hold hard! gentlemen, one moment," pleaded Tim Burr, almost piteously, as, with a protesting gesture, he lifted up his hand. "Give 'em a little time, now do."

Galloping on a few strides, the main body of the pack suddenly got fairly on the line of their fox, and broke out into a glorious chorus of many-noted voices, which to some of us present was far sweeter than the most melodious music.

The narrow road was now turned into a scene of confusion and striving. The majority endeavoured to wedge their way on to the point where the whip had taken up his station, and where a second road ran at right angles with the turnip field; but a determined few, amongst whom were Nell and myself, greatly impeded their advance, by turning our horses round and attempting to jump the fence. Tim Burr and Captain Hooper had weakened it a bit by their passage, and, as usual in such cases, everybody made for the same spot, thus causing an almost complete block. Hounds by this time were some two hundred yards distant, and running like wild fire.

"This will never do," I said, impatiently, to Nell. "We shall lose our start altogether if we don't look alive."

The words were scarcely out of my mouth, when I saw an opening a few yards to the rear, where the fence certainly looked black and unyielding, but, nevertheless, was by no means unjumpable.

"Follow me," I said hurriedly, to my companion, and the next moment The Siren swished through the thorns, and, with a snort of satisfaction, landed well into the field beyond. Sweetheart seemed to have taken the mare into his good graces. At all events, he refused to be separated from her, and, seizing the bit between

his teeth, he made a magnificent bound, which would have cleared an obstacle twice the size.

"That's right," I said approvingly, as we galloped hard in pursuit through the wet turnips, for hounds were now streaming like a cataract over the fence beyond, and, making a sharp turn to the right, threatened to upset the calculations of those who had had the misfortune to stick to the road.

"Come along," I cried. "I do believe we are in for a run."

And it really looked like it, for, as side by side we flew the fence out of the heavy turnip field and landed into good sound turf, we could see the mottled beauties just in front, running like mad things, as they flashed over the green sward in a compact and even body, beautiful to behold. There was a breast-high scent. Occasionally, one of the younger bitches would throw her tongue, but the elder members maintained an almost absolute silence, as they raced across the grass.

It was a glorious sight to see these highly trained, highly bred hounds, animated with one accord by the same desire for blood, glancing like meteors in pursuit of their quarry. Only some dozen of us were with them altogether. Those who had not had the nerve or promptitude to jump out of the road were left hopelessly in the rear, without a prospect of rejoining the flying beauties.

On, on they tore, every man doing his very best to go the pace and maintain his position. A dozen times did I thank my stars that I was riding The Siren. Neither Obadiah nor Golden Drop—good, steady hunter as he had proved himself to be—could have lived with them for a quarter of a mile.

I glanced hastily at Nell.

She was close beside me, sitting well back in the saddle, whilst her small hands grasped firmly at the reins. I could see that Sweetheart was pulling her considerably. He was unusually fresh, and such highly bred horses literally revel in a good fast gallop. The

veins in his glossy neck were swelling, and the proud nostrils distending, as they showed their vivid scarlet linings. Fast as we were going, the gallant animal wanted to go even faster; but Nell was an experienced horsewoman, and would not allow him to expend his forces so early in the day. She controlled him with admirable skill, now giving an inch or two of rein as he snatched eagerly at the bridle, anon shortening it as the strain became less intense. Slight as those small wrists seemed, their sinews were made of steel. As we galloped full tilt down the steep side of an incline studded all over with mole-hills, I could not help admiring her perfect riding. Not one woman in a thousand would have managed a high mettled animal so well and gracefully. She sat quite quiet; only her glowing cheeks and sparkling eyes betrayed the excitement she was feeling.

But my reflections were cut short. It was no time for meditation of any sort. Even all thought of danger—not for myself, it is needless to say, but for Nell—vanished. We dash headlong through a gate at the bottom of the hill, which mercifully proves open, and then breast the ascent on the opposite side. It is very steep, the country round Whinboro' is undulating in the extreme, but we dare not take a pull at our horses, for fear of losing the hounds altogether. When we reach the top, our steeds are puffing and blowing. A broken-winded horse in the rear gives me an uncomfortable sensation. As I listen to that laboured breathing, I almost fancy it proceeds from The Siren, but whatever her infirmities may be, she is sound in the wind, and a good flat field of well drained grass enables her to recover from her climbing exertions. I hear the bellows growing fainter and fainter in the distance, and then they die away altogether. No broken-winded horse could keep up with the hounds as they are running to-day.

Tim Burr is close at the tail of the pack, Captain Hooper is a little to the right, riding a line of his own; Nell and I lead the division on the left, and behind us

are not more than some half-dozen sportsmen. The others have been choked off already by the pace, and we have regularly given the field the slip. Our spirits rise at the thought. It may be selfish to desire to outdo one's companions, but it is human nature to rejoice when we succeed. Every man who has got well away with hounds, will bear me out in this statement.

We are now in splendid grass country, consisting of large enclosures and fair flying fences. All of them have ditches, some two, but with the impetus we have on, they prove no hindrance. Our horses' blood is up, they are thoroughly warmed to their work, and go at each successive obstacle with a willingness and dash that sends a glow of triumph through the frames of their riders. Once or twice indeed The Siren misjudges her distance, and takes off too soon, but on every occasion the pace carries us over or through! As for Sweetheart, he never makes a mistake, fencing throughout in the most perfect manner. With Nell's light weight, he has an advantage over most of his companions. The girl's cheeks are rosy red, her bright eyes flash fire, and on her young face settles a look of mingled resolution and delight. Her spirit coincides with mine. No power on earth should stop us now. Caution flies to the wind, as we tear onwards, and the fresh air whistles about our ears.

I regret to say, all Mr. Austen's admonitions are forgotten. The ecstasy is too keen for any thought of danger to find a dwelling-place in the brain. The utmost I can do is to endeavour to choose the most likely-looking spot in each fence as we come at it. I jump first, not daring to let The Siren go after any one else, for fear of her rushing headlong on the top of the leader; and Nell follows me in brilliant style, with all a man's gallantry and courage and a woman's feminine grace. At every serious impediment we arrive at I say to myself, "This is not fit work for a slender, delicate girl," but I withdraw the remark—or rather admiration usurps its place—when I see Sweetheart

land like a deer, never dislodging his mistress an eighth of an inch from the saddle.

We have now been galloping hard for close upon thirty minutes, and still hounds keep on their impetuous way, and show no symptoms of wavering. We begin to long for a check. The severity of the pace is telling upon the horses.

Crash, crash! go the binders of a big stake-bound fence on either side of us, and Captain Hooper is down, also Dicky, who up to this point had maintained his place right well. Nell and I get over without a fall. Our pride increases.

"What a glorious run!" I gasp hurriedly to my companion.

"Grand!" she responds monosyllabically.

Prolonged conversation is out of the question, every faculty is engrossed in keeping one's position and not falling to the rear.

And now, all of a sudden, right ahead, we catch the gleam of water as it glances like a silver streak in the cold sunlight, and we see before us an ominous line of dark stumpy willows that fringe the banks of the well-known, much-dreaded Quart, a brook celebrated for the number of gallant sportsmen who have met with immersion in its dark, treacherous depths.

For a few moments the foremost hounds slacken their speed a trifle, and hope rises in our breasts. Delusive goddess! the next minute the pack disappear, and when they again become visible, the panting beauties are clambering up the opposite bank, with dripping skins and moist, red, hanging tongues. There is nothing for it but to do or die.

"Is Sweetheart a good water jumper?" I ask anxiously.

"Yes," says Nell proudly. "He is good at everything; besides," and she set her rosy mouth with an air of determination, "I should not stop now, even if he were not. But how about The Siren?"

"I don't know; but we'll very soon find out."

Tim Burr was absolute first, and with his customary

gallantry he raced down at the yawning seventeen-foot cavity ahead of him. He was riding as good a hunter as ever looked through a bridle, but he had been forced to gallop at topmost speed, and the horse was a jit beat. Still, it never entered his head to refuse. He made a bold bid but he jumped somewhat short, and splash! both he and his rider disappeared.

I was close behind, so close indeed that I had only just time to pull a yard or two to the left, and at the last moment select another place. Now for it. Would The Siren jump water or not? My heart almost stopped beating.

Yes.

She cocked her fine small ears, rushed at the brook with a will, never dwelt a single second, and taking off exactly in her stride landed well on the furthestmost side, though, owing to the rotten state of the banks, one hind leg gave way under her, as a large piece of earthy turf rolled with a dull sound into the water.

"Put on the steam," I shouted out to Nell. "It is bigger than it looks."

There followed one minute of breathless anxiety, during which I almost closed my eyes from positive fright; the next she was at my side, with a smile of pleasure lighting up her fair flushed face, and Sweet-heart stretching his beautiful neck and grunting with satisfaction.

"Bravo!" I cried enthusiastically; "that was a big brook, and no mistake. If this goes on, we shall have it all to ourselves before long."

I spoke triumphantly, yet I little thought my words would actually come true. Nevertheless, as one good man after another subsided into the watery depths of the Quart, Nell and I remained the only pair who negotiated that formidable cavity successfully. Tim Burr I heard afterwards could not get his horse out, and though offered another, the animal refused to jump where he had seen so many of his comrades "come to grief," and the gallant huntsman was there-

fore forced to go round to the nearest ford, some considerable distance off.

Meanwhile, Nell and I pursued our glorious career. We were intoxicated by success, and believing this fine run could not possibly last much longer, were perhaps a little harder on our horses than we otherwise should have been. To make matters worse, too, the fields through which we now galloped were large, imperfectly drained meadows, with pools of water and half-melted snow lying on their surface. Game as were our nags, the heavy going told upon them. But now, more than ever, we felt that it was incumbent upon us to keep at the very heels of the pack; for were not we the sole representatives left of that large body of horsemen who, only an hour ago, had assembled in honour of the chase? If we lived to be a hundred, such good fortune might never befall us again. An opportunity like the present was one to be respected and made the most of.

I believe Nell felt as I did; anyhow, no thought of giving in entered our minds. We flew three or four easyish fences, and got over them fairly well, though at the last one The Siren pecked heavily on landing, and I knew that her bolt was pretty nearly shot.

Even Sweetheart began to hold out signals of distress, and instinctively we made for the gaps, although by so doing we lost ground. Both horses were dark with perspiration, and great beads rolled from their heated sides.

"Surely this cannot last much longer," I said to my companion. "They *must* check soon."

But though by this time the hounds were travelling at a slower rate, they still carried a good head, and continued to stream forwards. And now another obstacle loomed ahead. To all appearances it was a trifling one, consisting of a low bank with a wide ditch on the near side and surmounted by a few thin, straggly thorns. I set The Siren at it carelessly, thinking she was sure to get over all right.

Fortunately for me, even when distressed she still went fast at her fences. Whilst in the air I saw that there was another ditch, even larger than the first one on the landing side, and by rights the place ought to have been doubled. The Siren gave a convulsive wriggle to her hind quarters, nevertheless she landed with both legs well in the ditch, tumbled on to her nose, and then with a great effort recovered herself and clambered out, just saving a fall.

"Come slowly and double it," I called to Nell, but alas! the warning came too late to be of service.

The courageous Sweetheart, trying to follow the mare's example, endeavoured, like her, to fly the whole thing, and very nearly succeeded in doing so, but not quite.

One hind hoof just dropped back with a little sharp jerk.

He, too, recovered himself, however, and I thought all was well, when, to my surprise and infinite consternation, I saw him stagger in a feeble, lurching, rolling kind of manner for a pace or two, and then fall heavily to the ground, as if he could do no more.

CHAPTER XXII.

POOR SWEETHEART!

In a minute I was off my horse. The sight of Nell lying full length on the moist earth sobered me instantaneously, and drove all thought of the hounds from my mind. One second sufficed to recall me from a fool's Paradise to the realities of life.

"Are you hurt?" I enquired anxiously, bending over her as I spoke, and stretching out my hand to help her to rise.

"No, not a bit," she answered cheerily, jumping to her feet, and disdaining any assistance, "I never had an easier fall."

"Thank God! for that," I ejaculated with a sigh of relief, for the mere idea of harm befalling her sent a chill of fear through my veins. "A broken bone would have been a terrible termination to our run, and I could not have looked your uncle in the face had such a catastrophe occurred."

"And now," said Nell impatiently, "let us make haste and get on again. I would not lose the finish of this splendid Hunt for worlds. Come, Sweetheart, old man," and she took hold of the horse's bridle, and gave it a gentle tug. "It is a new thing for you to be lazy. Get up this minute, you dear!"

For Sweetheart still lay exactly where he had fallen, with his hind legs doubled up beneath him in an uncomfortable attitude, his fore legs extended, and his head and neck stretched out flat on the green grass.

Somehow I did not like his position. It hardly seemed a natural one, and I could not understand his lying so quiet, and being altogether so strangely passive.

As Nell pulled at the reins, he made a feeble effort to rise, and lifted up his head about a foot; but almost immediately he let it fall down again as before.

"Why! my beauty," cried Nell in surprise, "what is the matter? You are not too tired to move, surely?"

Almost as if the good horse understood her words, and resented the unmerited reproach, did he lift his full eye plaintively to the beloved countenance of his mistress. There was something almost human in the glance; but I noticed that the bright orb, usually so clear and intelligent, had a dull, glazed look.

"I believe he is beat, Miss Fitzgerald," I said. "Don't hurry him, and no doubt he'll get his wind all right in a few minutes."

She turned upon me with an air of comical indignation.

"Beat!" she exclaimed scornfully. "How little you know Sweetheart to suggest such a thing. I have never got to the bottom of him yet. He was a little tired and hot certainly, but beat—no! Besides, I would not have ridden him had I thought he was really dis-

tressed. I would give up the finest run in the world, rather than be unkind to so good a horse. And what's more, although I verily believe Sweetheart would go till he dropped, he would never lie there like a log, without making an effort, just as if he were a common underbred cart-horse," and she flushed up in defence of her favourite, not brooking the smallest insinuation against him.

"Give me the bridle," I said with a touch of command, for it is sweet to the male nature to exercise authority over the woman it loves; "very likely Sweetheart only wants a little help, and your arms are scarcely sufficiently strong to raise a full-grown horse from the ground. Will you be good enough to hold The Siren, and let me try what I can do?"

So saying, I took Sweetheart by the head and, putting forth all my strength, endeavoured to lift him up. Once or twice he almost succeeded in standing on his fore-legs, but directly I let go my hold, he squatted down on his haunches like a dog, and finally rolled limply over. His hind quarters appeared incapable of movement. The vitalizing power seemed to have gone from them.

Again and again I raised him, but always with the same result. Poor horse! he would have got up quickly enough if he had been able, but, although the gallant spirit still was willing, the flesh was weak. A terrible suspicion shot through my mind. I dared not communicate it to Nell. I knew how dear Sweetheart was to her, and my courage failed me. She was watching me with ever increasing distress. Her agitation became quite piteous.

"Oh! what—what is wrong?" she cried, with tears in her voice.

"I am afraid he is very much hurt," I answered, gravely.

Nell turned as white as a sheet, but even in her anxiety she thought of others.

"Go on, Captain Mannington," she said. "Never mind about me. I am sure to meet some one in a few

minutes who can help, and you must not lose the finish of the run on my account."

"Pshaw!" I exclaimed, impatiently. "What do I care about it when you are not there? Do you think I should enjoy myself if I deserted you and Sweetheart when you were in trouble? If so, you must indeed have a poor opinion of me."

"But you might come back, you know, when the hounds run into their fox."

"Miss Fitzgerald, please don't annoy me by suggesting such a thing. To begin with, I have not the slightest wish to go, and secondly, nothing on earth would induce me to leave you in your present predicament."

The decision of my manner seemed to carry conviction.

"You are very good," she said softly. "But it is just like you."

"Not at all. And pray do not let us discuss the matter any longer. We must see what we can do for Sweetheart. He is the chief consideration just now."

"Ah! poor darling. How are we to make him better?"

"We can only try our best," I said; but, in my own mind, I knew full well that human aid could be of no avail. All the physics and nostrums in the world would not cure him.

"Captain Mannington," she said eagerly, as if struck by a sudden inspiration, "you are so kind that I feel I may ask you to do something for me."

"Most certainly."

"Very well, then, will you please mount The Siren at once—this very instant—and ride off as fast as you can to the nearest village. There is sure to be one somewhere close, and they will tell you where a veterinary surgeon is to be found. I want you to bring him back with you without delay."

"But I do not like leaving you alone, Miss Fitzgerald."

"Oh! never mind me. I shall be all right,

Besides, people are certain to turn up before long. Anyhow, I shall come to no harm."

"I am not so sure of that," I replied, feeling very unwilling to forsake her, even at her bidding. "The hounds appear to me to have turned sharp to the left; in which case those behind us may never come this way at all."

"No matter," she persisted. "Oh! Captain Mannington, do please go, and I promise to take every care of poor dear Sweetheart until you return. You and I can do nothing by ourselves. We are not learned enough in horse-doctoring."

And, to my horror, she thrust The Siren's bridle into my hands, and, before I knew what she was about, plumped herself down on the wet grass by her favourite's side. I knew now that, however painful might be the confession, it was my duty to tell her the truth.

"Miss Fitzgerald," I expostulated, in a tremulous voice, "this is madness on your part. If you sit there, you will catch your death of cold, especially after having been so warm."

Fortunately, I had on my covert coat. It was the work of a minute to take it off and spread it out beside her. But, to my despair, she refused to avail herself of the loan.

"I don't care a bit about myself," she said, drearily, "I am positive Sweetheart feels the cold. See, how the poor darling trembles." And, lifting the coat, she carefully covered up his quarters. "There!" she went on, "at any rate, that will keep him warm, and now, Captain Mannington, if you wish to oblige me very, *very*, VERY much indeed," emphasizing the words, "please be off."

"I would do anything in the world to oblige you," I said, irresolutely, "but," and I stopped short, not knowing best how to break the bad news; for what at first had only been a suspicion had now become an absolute conviction.

"But what?" she asked quickly, as if detecting

some hidden meaning in my words. There was nothing for it but to speak out plainly; yet I shrank from the task of giving her pain and of witnessing her grief. Coward-like, I fancied she would ever after connect me with it.

"I would go for the vet. in a minute, Miss Fitzgerald, only"—and again my heart failed me.

"Yes," she said huskily, and her lip began to quiver in an ominous fashion. "You had better tell me the worst. I—I—will try and bear it."

"The fact of the matter is," I blurted out desperately, "in a case like this, the best advice in the world could do no good."

Every vestige of colour fled from her cheeks. She trembled in all her limbs.

"No good?" she echoed faintly. "What do you mean?"

"Must I tell you? Can you not guess, or have you no suspicion of the sad truth?"

For all answer she lifted up her glistening eyes to mine, whilst her breath came fast and slow.

"Sweetheart"—I went on, hoarsely, for there was a lump in my throat, which checked clear utterance—"Sweetheart—has—broken—his back."

There was a pause. For one instant she stood looking at me as if her mind refused to grasp my meaning; then, as the full significance of the fatal words flashed upon her comprehension, she gave a low cry of despair and, flinging her arms round Sweetheart's stiffening neck, burst into a perfect storm of tears. Every sob that she gave pierced me to the heart like a knife. The sight of her sorrow overcame me completely, for I felt powerless to check it.

"Miss Fitzgerald," I stammered, hardly knowing what to say, or how to comfort her, "don't give way like this; it won't do, upon my word," and I could feel my own eyes moistening—"it won't do at all. Do try and bear up."

But she took no heed. Her slender body quivered from head to foot, as sob after sob convulsed it. I

was simply distracted. No trial is greater to a man than to stand by inactively, and see the girl he loves crying her eyes out.

"Oh! Sweetheart, dear Sweetheart," she moaned, disjointedly. "It is I—who have killed you—by my pride and recklessness. You were getting a little tired, I know—and I ought to have pulled you up—and not minded about those horrid hounds. What did it ma—ma—matter whether I was in at the death or not? It was all my odious vanity—and I took a mean advantage of your courage and goodness. Oh! my beauty! my beauty!" hiding her wet face in the horse's silky mane. "I shall ne—never get another like you, and as long as I live I shall never forgive myself for this day's work. Poor, poor Sweetheart!"

He knew her voice—the voice of the mistress who had ridden him so often, and whom he had carried so well. His eye was dim; the films of death were fast gathering over it; his beautiful limbs were straightening, and his satin coat hardening to the touch; but he recognized her even now. Slowly and tenderly, like one who takes a sad farewell of his dearest friend, he insinuated his soft tan muzzle into the palm of Nell's hand, and licked it like a dog. The pathetic action, so dumb, and yet so eloquent, made her tears flow fast. She felt that this was good 'bye for ever.

"Sweetheart, Sweetheart," she cried in heart-broken accents, "take me with you. I feel so miserable. Oh, my God!" bowing down her head, "would that I could die too!" At these terrible words, full of anguish, I lost all self-control. They simply maddened me, and at any cost, I felt that I must comfort her. Hastily fastening The Siren to the bough of a tree, I knelt down by Nell's side, and put my arm round her waist.

"Hush, Nell!" I whispered, "you must not talk like that. You do not know what you are saying. It is unkind to your friends—to—to—me."

"Friends?" she sobbed, "I have none like Sweetheart; and he"—extricating herself from my grasp—"he—he—is—dying."

Still I would not be repulsed. I knew that she was beside herself with grief, and it was for me to try and lighten her woe.

"Come away," I said, gently. "This is no place for you."

I spoke kindly but authoritatively, and to my surprise, of her own accord she drew nearer to me, as if she realized that I only desired her good.

"What am I to do?" she said, helplessly; and her poor little tear-stained face lifted itself to mine, with a beseeching look of appeal.

Shall I confess my baseness? As she stood there close to me, she and I alone in the field, I felt sorely tempted to stoop down and kiss her sweet pale lips. The next moment, with a blush of shame, I realized that such an action, under the present circumstances, would disgrace my manhood. If I would really prove of any assistance it was imperative that I should do nothing to frighten her, or give the alarm to her sensitive susceptibilities. I rejoiced now, that, owing to her great distress, she had taken no notice of the inadvertent use I had made of her Christian name. How was she to know that I always thought of her, and dreamt of her, as Nell, and that Nell she would be to me until the end of my days.

"I think you had better come," I repeated, persuasively. "I see a house over yonder, where you could sit for a little while until I am able to find you a conveyance, and this is no fitting sight for you."

Even as I spoke the end was fast approaching. Two or three convulsive gasps, and an increasing heaving of the flank, warned me that Sweetheart would soon be no more.

There he lay, struck down in the flower of his beauty and strength; the strong young Life that, only half an hour ago, gave force and motion to every lissom limb, gradually but surely ebbing away. In the midst of his triumph, Death had come, just as it does to human beings, making one wonder, vaguely, what are the mysterious physical properties that constitute sensation

and motion. A shock to the spinal cord—a simple fracture—and the brain ceases to work, loss of feeling sets in, and, in a case like the present, recovery is altogether hopeless. Sadly I mused, as I gazed at the last dying struggles of the good and noble animal; my heart felt heavy, my spirit sorrowful within me, for sudden death like this ever gives rise to a host of mournful reflections.

Nell allowed me to lead her a few paces; then, with a fresh outburst of grief, she cried: "Oh, Captain Mannington! do not think me wilful, or disobedient, but I—I—cannot leave him. He is so—so dear to me."

I took her hand in mine, and pressed it firmly. I saw that the time had come for exercising a little authority.

"You must," I said, huskily. "Do not think I do not feel for you, but you cannot stay here any longer. You are distressing both yourself and me needlessly." The last argument was effective.

"Very well," she said, submissively; "you know best. I—I will try and do what you tell me to."

Her sudden acquiescence touched me to the quick. It showed that she had confidence in me.

"I only wish your good, Miss Fitzgerald. I would give a year's income to bring poor Sweetheart back to life. But your uncle placed you in my charge, and I must take care of you."

"Yes, yes, I know," she said through her tears. "You are kindness itself; and so patient into the bargain. But do you know what it is to be very fond of a thing, so fond that you love it better almost than a human being, and then to lose it without a moment's warning?"

"Yes, I had a dog once, who was my best friend."

"And what became of him—did he die?"

"He met with an accident and was killed all in a second."

"Ah!" she sighed, "just like poor Sweetheart."

"Yes, just like poor Sweetheart. So I can quite understand what you feel. Unfortunately these mis-

adventures will happen, especially in the hunting field."

"But it was my fault," said Nell with bitter exculpation.

"Now, Miss Fitzgerald, if you do not wish me to be really angry with you, do not let me hear you accuse yourself again. You are in no way to blame."

"Do you think so? It would comfort me if I could believe that."

"I am certain of it. Precisely the same thing might have happened to any one. Why, I have known horses to break a bone simply through galloping bare-backed over a field. No one can account for accidents."

By this time we had approached the house, which proved to be a red brick cottage belonging to a small farmer. I tapped at the door, and a respectable looking old woman, with snow-white hair and a checked handkerchief folded across her bosom, opened it. I asked if the lady might stay for a little while in the sitting-room and enquired after a conveyance. She assured me that one should be ready whenever I desired.

"Will you remain here for a few minutes?" I said to Nell. "I will not be long." For by the time I got back, I fully expected to find poor Sweetheart dead.

"Yes," she said obediently. "I will do anything you wish."

The woman showed her into a small parlour, very clean and very stiff, with shiny horse-hair furniture, and a profusion of crochet antimacassars and wax flowers, and then I left her, with a few words of encouragement.

I turned back once, as I strode away, and saw her dear little sorrowful face, pressed against the window panes, watching my departure, as if she dreaded to lose sight of her last remaining friend.

I would have given a hundred pounds to have known if any thought of me was in her mind, and yet when I had called her by her Christian name she seemed perfectly passive. Faint heart never won fair

lady! Ought I to be bolder, more sanguine and confident! Should I seize the fortress by storm?

No. When a woman is in trouble, it is a low thing to take advantage of her distress, in order to press a suit that might or might not be welcome. I would bide my time, and watch the progress of events.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A SAD DRIVE HOME.

WHEN I returned to the place where Sweetheart was lying, I found, as I expected, that all was over. He lay quite dead; a dark patch on the green grass, which outlined with almost painful distinctness his slender limbs and fair proportions.

This terrible catastrophe, that so abruptly put an end to our short-lived pleasure, filled me with melancholy, and made me reflect seriously on the strange and sudden transitions to which we all are subject. Full of life and health one hour; stiff and stark the next. But supposing if, instead of the gallant hunter lying motionless at my feet, Nell herself had been the victim? I shuddered at the very thought, and to induce a change of ideas, sought refuge in practical action.

First, I reverently cut off a long lock of Sweetheart's dark silky mane and placed it in my pocket-book, for I felt certain that a few days hence, when the poignancy of her grief had in a measure abated, Nell would cherish the souvenir. This done, I proceeded to remove the saddle and bridle, since they, alas! were all that remained to take home. He, who in the morning had been worth 300 guineas, was now only fit for the kennels.

Whilst thus engaged, a horseman rode up towards me, through a bridle-gate, about thirty yards distant. In the hurry of the chase, neither Nell nor I had noticed it, and I could not help thinking how if we had

but done so matters might have been very different. In that case poor Sweetheart might still have been alive and well.

But it does not do to dwell upon the "*ifs*" of this world ; they only fill us with remorse and regret for the actual what-is and give birth to many bitter reflections.

"Had an accident, sir?" exclaimed the new-comer commiseratingly, for one good feature about sporting men is that they almost invariably sympathize with each other in misfortunes, and are ever willing to give a helping hand.

I looked up, and put him down as a cross between a farmer and a horse-dealer, but there was an air of concern on his good-humoured, round, red face, which won my heart immediately.

"Yes," I said briefly. "A very bad one."

"Indeed ! I am sorry to hear that. Why, the horse looks as if he were dead."

"He looks what he is, then."

"Dear ! dear ! A bad business."

"Yes, particularly as a gamer, truer, pluckier animal never looked through a bridle."

"More's the pity, sir. But there, that's always the way. There seems a fatality about the good ones meeting with mishaps, whereas if you have a real rank brute that is no pleasure to ride, he goes on year after year, without even so much as getting a thorn prick. But excuse me, sir," he continued, taking a keen look at Sweetheart's prostrate body, "I seem to know that horse's shape quite well. Is he not Miss Fitzgerald's celebrated chestnut-roan?"

"He is, worse luck."

"Dear me ! How did it happen?"

"He broke his back at this confounded double."

"And a very awkward one it is, too. I have known many a good horse meet with a similar fate, at this very fence."

"He tried to fly the whole thing," I explained, "and just dropt one hind leg."

"What a sad pity. I am afraid Miss Fitzgerald

will be terribly put out at the loss of her favourite. She's a young lady as knows how to appreciate a valuable animal."

"Yes, she is almost beside herself. I have only just succeeded in persuading her to go to yonder cottage. She wanted to stay with the horse till the last, but I knew it would only upset her still more to witness his dying struggles."

"Poor thing," murmured my companion. "It will be a dreadful blow; for she was so uncommon fond of the roan, and well she might be, since he carried her like a bird. I remember in last year's great run from Coppington Gorse, Miss Fitzgerald had the best of it all the way. Not a man amongst us could touch her."

"She is a beautiful rider," I remarked.

"She is that, sir. And now tell me if I can do anything to help you. People are wandering about the country in every direction asking where the hounds are. I suppose you don't happen to know."

"If you had asked me that question a quarter of an hour ago, I could have given you a pretty correct answer. After jumping the Quart, Miss Fitzgerald and I were alone with the pack, but now I have no more idea than the man in the moon where they have gone to. They were still running when this bad accident occurred, and as far as I could tell seemed likely to do so for some time longer."

"Well, well! I have galloped after them so many miles, without even catching a glimpse of their sterns, that I shall give it up as a bad business for to-day; therefore, sir, if I can be of any service to you, please let me know."

I considered for a moment, before replying. It struck me that it would be by no means a bad plan to get my new friend to lead The Siren back to Cattington Towers, in which case I myself might drive Nell home, and try my best to keep up her spirits, instead of consigning her to the tender mercies of some country lout.

"In what direction are you going?" I asked.

"Well, sir," he replied, "my home lies Whinboro' way, but I don't mind trotting a bit round, if so be as how it would assist you and the young lady."

"Thanks, you are very kind. Do you think you could take my mare as far as the Towers, and ask one of the grooms there to put her into the stable until I arrive?"

"Surely, sir; I will do so with pleasure."

"Then if you are disposed to start at once I can go back to the cottage and get the trap ready for Miss Fitzgerald. I want to stow these things away," shouldering the saddle and bridle as I spoke, "without letting her see what I am about, for the sight of them is sure to make her feel bad."

"Ay, ay, sir! I understand," said my companion, unfastening The Siren, who was beginning to get very impatient at her detention, and leading her off. "You are quite right, and I'll lose no time."

"And hark you!" I called out after him as he turned to go, "if you could manage to have a few words with Mr. Austen, and tell him Miss Fitzgerald's horse has been killed, but that she herself is safe and unharmed, so much the better. It will spare her being questioned if he knows beforehand what has happened."

So saying, I retraced my steps to the cottage, and walking in by the back yard, successfully hid my tell-tale burden in the rear of the little Whitechapel cart that was being prepared for our use.

When all was in readiness I took courage and went into the parlour, where I found Nell sitting in a dejected attitude, crying to herself. When she saw me she pulled out her pocket-handkerchief—I noticed that it was sopping wet—and hastily attempted to dry her eyes. They were quite red with weeping, and the tears came welling up to them every instant, although she made heroic struggles to force them back.

"Now," I said, as cheerfully as I could, for I realized that it would never do for me to give way, or let her see how deeply I too was affected by the occurrences of the afternoon, "everything is ready for a start, and

if you have no objection I think we had better be going; it will begin to get cold before long."

"Sweetheart!" she said faintly, as if scarcely daring to enquire. "How is he?"

"His joys and griefs are at an end," I replied. "The only consolation is, he did not suffer any pain."

She did not speak, receiving the intelligence like one stunned and incapable of bearing further sorrow.

"Come," I said softly, holding out my hand towards her; "let us be going."

She rose submissively at my bidding, and let me lead her from the room like a child. Poor little thing! All the playful spirit and pretty archness were regularly crushed out of her. There was something very pathetic in her meek acquiescence with my wishes. It made my heart swell.

As we left the cottage and entered the yard she gave a sigh.

"It is so terrible," she said piteously. "It all seems to me like a bad dream."

"Try not to think of it more than you can help," I replied, assisting her into the cart, and carefully wrapping my covert coat round her shoulders. "I only wish that I had it in my power to comfort you, but I know how impossible it is for anybody just at present to succeed in doing so. Nothing but time can soften your grief."

"I hate Time," said Nell, almost fiercely. "Why should we be in such a desperate hurry, directly those we love are dead, to forget them? All the efforts of the living seem to take the shape of endeavouring to produce oblivion. I call it unjust, unkind, ungrateful."

Not knowing well what reply to make to this speech I whipped up the pony and started. He was a rough, shaggy little fellow, with a fat body, and short stumpy legs, and at every tiny hill he seemed to consider it his duty to subside into the most crawling of walks; consequently our progress was slow. That, too, in spite of a vast amount of flogging and angry admonition; cas-

tigation and threats alike produced no result on the obstinate beast, who through thick and thin stuck to his own way and mode of progression.

Meanwhile I endeavoured to keep up a running fire of trivial remarks, which, although I knew them to be unoriginal in the extreme, seemed to be better for my companion than the maintenance of a dead silence. All I wanted was, if possible, to distract her thoughts. But she responded to my well-meant, though somewhat clumsy efforts, in such a dreamy and automatic fashion that I grew discouraged, feeling my attempts at conversation were a failure, and rather bored her than otherwise. I could see that she was thinking of Sweetheart.

"How green the grass is," I rambled on in desperation, not caring what nonsense I talked, so long as I said something. "Really the country all about is remarkably pretty."

"Yes, very," assented Nell, absently. I believe she had not listened to a word.

"In the summer it no doubt looks quite lovely. I suppose it must have been my stupidity or ignorance, but I always fancied that this part of the world was very flat and uninteresting, whereas as a matter of fact the country round about Whinboro' is exceedingly undulating."

I paused, but my companion's attention was wandering, and she evidently did not think it necessary to reply to my common-place observations. So I went at it again harder than ever.

"Yes, exceedingly undulating," I continued, "and in places very prettily timbered. What you want, though, is water. To my mind, no scenery is perfect without a river flowing through it. It gives tone to the whole landscape—a sort of 'cachet,' you know."

I was getting a little confused. The sound of one's own voice grows slightly bewildering after a time, when you are conscious of talking pure rubbish, and evoke no response. I began to flounder and halt. "By-the-by," I said, by way of starting a fresh topic,

"I wonder what the time is?" And I glanced at my watch. "By Jove! only half-past two. What a long day this has seemed, to be sure."

Nell gave a sudden shudder.

"Are you cold?" I said anxiously.

"No, thank you."

"Because, if you are, I can easily give you another shawl. I have one here, which I took the precaution of borrowing from our friend at the cottage."

A faint smile curled the corners of her little sad mouth.

"Did you think of that, Captain Mannington?" she said, hardly above a whisper.

"Yes, why not? It was but a very small thing to remember. Besides, the days get chilly, this time of year, towards the afternoon."

She shot one swift glance at me, then immediately dropping her eyes, once more relapsed into silence. As for me, I continued conversing fluently about the weather, the country, the pony, the aspect of political affairs, and everything under the sun, until at length we drove up the avenue of Cattington Towers.

It seems a funny thing to say, when one is seated in the same vehicle with the young lady of one's choice, but it was a positive relief when the drive came to an end. There was a tension about the situation which rendered it almost unbearable. If I could have spoken out all that was in my mind, and told Nell of my love and sympathy, things would have been different altogether; but as it was, my tongue was tied, and I had an uneasy and excessively disagreeable conviction that under existing circumstances she would have preferred my absence to my company. And no man can be altogether comfortable when he entertains such a belief. It makes him feel awkward and distrustful of his powers of pleasing.

Not that I blamed Nell.

I could understand her wish to be alone. Only, until I delivered her over into safe keeping, I essayed to prevent her from brooding too much over Sweet-

heart's death. But, all the same, when I took a furtive look at her drawn face, quivering features and little tremulous mouth, I knew full well that such pent-up sorrow must have an outlet before much longer. I respected the self-control she was so bravely endeavouring to exercise, and it increased my admiration for her character; but there are limits to the capabilities of human nature, and I foresaw that an outbreak of grief was inevitable, as a natural consequence of this restraint.

We drove up to the front door, which was opened almost immediately by Mr. Austen in person. A single glance was sufficient to convince me that he already knew the bad news.

He did not speak a word, but he stretched out both his arms with an indescribably loving gesture, and lifted Nell from the pony cart, as much as to say that any disaster was bearable so long as she herself was unharmed and by his side again.

She, on her part, just gave one hasty look up into his friendly old face, and then, with a half-smothered cry, buried her head on his broad shoulder.

"Uncle," she said pathetically, feeling she could confide all her woe to him, "I am so miserable. You cannot think how utterly wretched I am."

He folded her to him in a close embrace, whilst his keen grey eyes grew dim.

"Yes, my darling, I know. But never mind just now. You shall tell me all about how it happened some other time. Come in and get warm, for you must be cold and quite tired out into the bargain."

"Sw—Sweetheart is—dead, uncle. Is it not dreadful, and I—I killed him."

He stroked her dark hair tenderly, for her hat had fallen backwards.

"Poor little Nell," he murmured in soothing accents. "Poor dear little Nell. Don't take on so. I will look about and get you the very best horse that can be bought for money."

"Ah!" she sobbed. "You will never get one like

him, and even if you succeeded in finding one a hundred times better I could not care for him as I did for Sweetheart. He was so generous and free. Oh! uncle," she added with a kind of moan, "is it not horrible to use the word 'was' instead of 'is'? It seems to come so quickly."

I don't know what was the matter with me to-day, but as I watched the pair, once again that curious lump rose in my throat, and gave me a strange choking sensation. Had I stayed where I was much longer, I verily believe I should have ended by making a complete fool of myself; besides which, I felt they were better alone and did not require my presence.

Nell had her own people to take care of her now, and I—as I bitterly said to myself—was only a stranger, whose path might never cross hers in the future.

So, without a word, I stole away from their society, and took the pony trap round to the stable yard. Arrived there, I mounted The Siren, who I found had already come, and had been well attended to by Mr. Austen's stud-groom, who, inconsolable as his mistress at the loss of Sweetheart, anxiously asked all particulars of his death.

Then, without re-entering the house, or stopping to say good-bye to my late companion or her uncle, I trotted off to Whinboro'.

It had been an eventful day, and one that left a sad impression on my mind. I grieved for the good horse that was gone, almost as much as did Nell herself, for I had grown to associate him with the girl. The spectacle of rider and steed, as I had first seen them, was photographed for ever on my mind. The one seemed a fitting part of the other, and their grace and beauty left a permanent impression which nothing could efface.

Besides all which, when we love a person very dearly—as dearly as I did Nell—it is impossible to help entering into their joys and sorrows, exactly as if they were your own. The affection that knows no sympathy is but a very poor and worthless passion.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WILL YOU FORGIVE ME?

THE next day I persuaded myself, without much difficulty, that it was nothing more than my duty to walk out as far as Cattington Towers, and enquire after Miss Fitzgerald. Ordinary politeness demanded such a course on my part, and I was the more disposed to pay the visit because I happened to know that Dicky had on the previous day made an appointment with Captain Hooper to watch one of that gentleman's young pedigree horses receive its first lessons in jumping, and be what is technically termed "schooled" over a few easy fences.

True, I was half afraid that when he heard my intention, he was quite capable of throwing over Captain Hooper; but although he appeared in two minds about doing so, and I could see was sorely tempted to accompany me, ultimately, to my secret satisfaction, he reluctantly decided to keep his engagement.

"I promised Hooper I would be there at three o'clock," he said waveringly, "so I suppose I ought to stick to my word."

"Of course you ought," I answered firmly.

"To-morrow is a hunting day," quoth Dicky. "I shall not be able to pay my respects to the fair mourner and condole with her until the day after."

Immediately after lunch, rejoicing at having got rid of my companion, I set out for Cattington Towers, and was lucky in finding both Nell and Mr. Austen at home. They were sitting over the fire in the morning room, an apartment they frequently used when alone, and as I entered I perceived that I was evidently interrupting some sort of a discussion.

"Halloa! Mannington, my boy, how do you do?" said Mr. Austen, rising to meet me, with a hearty welcome apparent in his fresh, good-tempered counte-

nance. "I am glad you have come, for it saves me writing you a note."

"Indeed, Mr. Austen?"

"I was just going to send a line to apologize for the rudeness I displayed yesterday afternoon, in allowing you to depart without saying a single word in acknowledgment of all the kindness you showed my little girl here," looking paternally at Nell. "The fact of the matter was we were both of us rather upset, and so forgot to be ordinarily civil."

"Oh! please don't mention it," I said, feeling quite distressed at the idea of receiving formal thanks from people I liked so much and would so gladly serve. "Any one would have done the same. I only hope that Miss Fitzgerald is none the worse."

And taking a chair as I spoke, I placed it close to Nell's side, and seating myself therein, looked her anxiously in the face. She was very pale, and this fact was the more noticeable because, as a rule, she had a good colour, whilst round her usually bright eyes was a dark purple rim that told tales of a sleepless night.

She smiled faintly as I drew near, and silently held out her hand.

"I am so glad you came in when you did, Captain Mannington," continued Mr. Austen briskly. "Nell and I were just having a bit of an argument."

"That is very unusual, is it not?" I said, with a smile.

"Yes, rather. We don't often have any words; but now I want you to talk to her seriously, and give her some good advice."

"Me? What about? I don't consider myself competent to undertake so delicate a task."

"I want you to tell her that she really must not grieve for poor Sweetheart's death in the way she is doing. After all, he was only a horse."

"Uncle," interrupted Nell, "I can't bear to hear you say that. It seems positively unkind. Are we not to love creatures simply because they are supposed to possess no souls? In that case very few human beings

would be worthy of our affections. I loved Sweetheart. I cannot forget him so soon."

"My darling," returned Mr. Austen somewhat perplexedly, "no one deplotes his loss more than I do; but when an animal is once dead and gone, not all the crying and regrets in the world will succeed in bringing him back to life again."

"That is the worst of it," sighed Nell, staring drearily at the glowing flames as they leaped up the chimney. "One knows one's tears are useless, and yet one cannot help shedding them. All love is a mistake."

Mr. Austen glanced uncomfortably at me. I could see that it made him simply wretched to hear her discourse in this melancholy strain.

"I do not altogether agree with you there, Miss Fitzgerald," I said. "Love may be, and often is, unfortunate; but while it lasts, it certainly develops many admirable qualities in a person's character. It takes people out of themselves, if nothing more, and that alone is a great gain. And although in Life we are robbed of much that is dear, nothing can rob us of our pleasant memories. They always remain."

Nell listened attentively to my words.

"It depends upon what the memories are," she said.

"No doubt; but in Sweetheart's case you have nothing but nice ones on which to dwell. Just think now, if you had ridden him for several more years, he might have grown lame, and would certainly have grown old and past his prime, then, although it seems hard to say so, you would no longer have cared for him as you do now. I think Sweetheart was a lucky horse to meet with his death in the midst of a triumphant career, and to die when he was most regretted. It is sad even for an animal to outlive affection."

"But it is so hard to go on just as usual," said poor Nell. "To have to smile, and eat, and walk, and ride, when your heart feels like a stone. I suppose people take these things differently, and some view them in a more philosophical light than others; but I cannot go

about and amuse myself so soon after Sweetheart's death."

"And I think that she ought to try to," interposed Mr. Austen. "It is a great mistake to give in too much."

"Your uncle is right," I said, feeling that it would never do to allow her to remain in her present condition. "Besides," I resumed, making use of an argument which I knew full well would carry more weight than any other I could use, "don't you see that it renders him miserable when you are unhappy? He loves you so dearly that, if only for his sake, and to please him, you should try and cheer up."

Nell drooped her head, and her long lashes lay like a velvety fringe on her soft cheeks, till I wondered if the world could contain any much prettier sight.

"Captain Mannington," she said, in a low voice, "do you know what uncle was trying to persuade me to do when you came?"

"No; but I am convinced of one thing; namely, that whatever it was, he spoke only with a desire for your good."

"He wants me to go to this ball on Friday night."

"Well, and why not?"

"I tell him that I—I really can't."

"Do you know what I think about the matter, Miss Fitzgerald?"

"No."

"I think that you ought to sacrifice your own feelings in order to please Mr. Austen, and do as he wishes. Am I not right in what I say?"

And I looked her full in the face.

Some species of magnetic attraction seemed to force her to raise her eyes—those honest, steady eyes—to mine, and as our glances met, a hot, slow flush mounted to her pale cheeks.

An electric thrill shot through my frame.

"Well," I repeated gently, "am I not right? If your uncle would like you to attend this ball, and if your many *friends*," laying a slight stress on the word,

"also desire your presence, will you not make an effort, however disagreeable it may be, and go?"

She was a brave girl, and moreover an unselfish one. She lifted her head a little higher, though the rich warm blood mounted to her very temples, and said "Yes."

"Come, come, that's all right," exclaimed Mr. Austen in tones of relief. "Captain Mannington," turning to me, "you have worked wonders, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Nothing can possibly be worse for Nell, than to shut herself up, and refuse to go anywhere or see any one. Not that I should like to be unkind and drag her out against her will, only I feel convinced that it is for her good."

I assented, though all the time my heart bled when I looked at the girl, and I liked her none the worse for the depth of feeling she displayed. I do not think, indeed, that I should have loved her so much had she borne Sweetheart's loss with greater equanimity.

"And now," I said cheerfully, addressing Nell, "that being settled, I want you to make me a promise, and commit another act of self-sacrifice."

"What is it?" she asked, as if a little alarmed at this fresh demand.

"I want you to promise to give me a dance in the course of the evening. I know that the probabilities are you will be besieged by partners, and so make the request beforehand. Will you grant it?"

Her lips began to quiver. I knew what that meant.

"I don't mind going to the ball, since you say it is my duty and will gratify uncle," she said in a distressed voice, "but please, oh, please don't ask me to dance."

"Would you rather not? We can sit out if you prefer it."

"Ah, yes, that would be much nicer. I would far sooner talk." Then, in a more assured voice, "I hope you do not think me very—very foolish, Captain Mannington?"

"Me? No, not at all. I can thoroughly enter into your feelings, as I told you before, but nevertheless, I

consider Mr. Austen is wise when he advises you as he does."

"I will try and follow his advice," she said humbly. "Only it takes a little time."

There was a slight pause; then, as if moved by a sudden impulse, she rose from her seat, and threw her arms round Mr. Austen's neck.

"Uncle," she said, "have I been a very naughty girl? Will you forgive me?"

The action took him by surprise, and affected him visibly.

"Naughty?" he echoed, giving one or two very energetic coughs. "No, of course not. Who ever said such a thing?"

"I am afraid I have been obstinate, and selfish as well," said Nell contritely. "I did not quite see things in their proper light; but oh! uncle dear, I *am* sorry, and promise to try and improve."

As she knelt there, with her sweet face pressed to Mr. Austen's, she looked so childish and innocent that one could have forgiven her any fault, however great. And after all, was it not possible that her instincts were purer and more natural than ours. We men of the world sought to persuade her out of her grief, to forget the dead and console herself with the living; she, simple, tenacious, and true, clung to the affections of her youth. Who knows? It was a problem too difficult for my solution; only as I gazed at Nell, I felt she was something far beyond the earthy, material nature of man, a being altogether more closely allied to the spiritual world.

Mr. Austen drew out his pocket-handkerchief and blew his nose repeatedly. He could not bear to show how much he was moved, and, man-like, sought to conceal his emotion. When he had in a measure got his feelings under control, he gave a little scornful laugh and said:

"Hoity-toity! Improve, indeed! What an idea! There is not much room for improvement, is there,

Captain Mannington?" addressing me, whose sympathetic looks he had intercepted.

"No, none," I answered emphatically; "at least, not in my opinion."

Mr. Austen looked quite pleased at what I suppose he considered my proper appreciation of his darling. As for Nell, she blushed rosy red, and turned her face aside.

I sat for a long time in the warm, prettily-furnished room, loth to tear myself away from the attraction that held me in its thralls. It was more than nice to feel—as somehow I did to-day—that Nell liked my being there, and to hear her gradually begin to join in the conversation as if it interested her.

And when at last I was reluctantly forced to take my leave, I had the pleasure of knowing that I left her in much better spirits than on my arrival, and I could not help thinking that I had had some small part in conducing towards this satisfactory result.

"Good-bye, Mannington. You have done her a wonderful lot of good," whispered Mr. Austen in my ear, as he accompanied me to the outer hall. "Curiously enough, I don't know anybody who exercises so much influence over her as you do, or for whose opinion she entertains a greater respect. For very nearly twenty minutes had I been trying to persuade her to go to this said ball, and almost at the first word from you she gave in and yielded the point."

I blushed with pleasure. I could feel my very ears tingling as I listened to Mr. Austen's words, and wondered if there could be any truth in them.

"You forget," I said, "that you were debarred from using the same argument. In my own mind, I am persuaded that nothing but Miss Fitzgerald's affection for you induced her to consent."

He shook his head and smiled.

"Dear little Nell!" he said softly. "What a good girl it is to be sure." Then aloud to me: "You did not think I was too hard upon her, did you, Mannington?"

I could not help laughing at the idea.

"Not much fear of that," I replied, as for the third and last time we shook hands.

Directly I reached home I sat down and wrote a note to a celebrated London florist, begging him to send the finest bouquet of violets and white camellias he could possibly arrange, on Friday evening, to Miss Fitzgerald, Catterington Towers, Whinboro', but without making any mention of my name. I wished to let her guess who the sender was, and how he thus desired to intimate that her tastes were well remembered.

Then, satisfied with my day's work, I made myself extra agreeable to Dicky, who in the course of the evening astonished me not a little, by suddenly declaring that he intended giving up the morrow's hunting and going to town instead.

"Going to town!" I echoed in surprise. "Whatever for? Just too when the frost has gone and we are having good sport."

In reply to this interrogation he simply looked mysterious.

"It's a great bore, Miles, old man, but the fact of the matter is, I have several purchases to make."

"Oh! indeed. Could you not put them off?"

"Not well. One of them requires a good deal of delicate selection."

I could not think what on earth Dicky meant, or what article he could intend buying that required "a good deal of delicate selection."

Had Nell anything to do with his proposed visit to the metropolis? From his manner I almost fancied that she had, but as he seemed indisposed to gratify my curiosity on this point, I refrained from further questioning, and at a tolerably early hour retired to rest.

CHAPTER XXV.

"THE MODEST VIOLET."

ON the morning of the ball, I received a letter from my father, which deranged the plans I had formed not a little. In coming to Whinboro' my intention had been to hunt from that town during the whole of my long leave; and now, when only in the middle of February, Sir Edward wrote, saying that he had caught a chill and had been feeling very unwell of late, and ended up by desiring my presence at Mannington Court, for the purpose of discussing important family matters connected with the estate.

I was exceedingly put out by the receipt of this epistle, but judged that the summons was too urgent to be lightly disregarded, and yet I could not bear the idea of leaving Whinboro'—or more strictly speaking, Nellie Fitzgerald—a single day before it was absolutely necessary. Until this moment I had never mustered up sufficient courage to face the idea of being separated from her. Sooner or later good-bye of course was inevitable; but hitherto I had been content to drift on, basking contentedly in the sunny present, and resolutely ignoring all thought of the future. And now my father's letter suddenly woke me from my halcyon dreams and rendered action of some sort imperative.

My first impulse was to sit down there and then and say it was impossible for me to leave Whinboro' until a day or two before the termination of my leave; but a very little consideration showed me how excessively unwise it would be to offend Sir Edward. I was entirely dependent upon him for supplies, and therefore owed him obedience, if nothing more. And yet it was very hard to have to go away just now, and feel that I might never see Nell again; that some day, whilst I was broiling under a fierce Indian sun, a newspaper from home might tell me of her marriage to a complete stranger. I ground my teeth at the very thought, and cursed the miserable poverty of my position. Two

thousand a year! one—nay, even five hundred clear, and I would have proposed to her to-morrow. I would have taken the bull by the horns, and at least known my fate one way or the other. Anything was better than this state of uncertainty, which kept me in a perpetual fever. I tossed the letter on one side, and determined to defer sending an answer for a day or two. I would wait until after the ball. A bright idea suddenly struck me. Why not consult Nell? I had a high opinion of her good sense and natural intelligence. *She* would advise me rightly; moreover, I should thus obtain an excellent opportunity of discovering if she displayed any symptoms of regret when she heard of my approaching departure. If she cared for me ever so little, surely she would express some sorrow; and according to her conduct so would I shape my own.

If I had clear evidence that I was wholly and absolutely indifferent to her, that I had not power to quicken her heart by one beat, or her pulses by a single throb, then I would go at once. Nothing was to be gained under these circumstances by lingering on, and playing the poor infatuated moth; but if, on the other hand, she—a wild delight thrilled my veins at the bare notion—well, even then, how could I possibly propose on twopence-halfpenny a year—in other words, ask the girl I loved, to keep *me*, feed *me*, clothe *me*? I had not Dicky's "cheek," and was not vain enough to imagine that my common-place grey eyes, indifferent features, sandy hair, and huge six feet of flesh and muscle, were a sufficient equivalent for all that I desired to gain in return.

Do not sneer when I say that it has often seemed to me, we men expect too much from matrimony. We approach it in the all-take and no-give spirit. In this nineteenth century the majority of bachelors require, first and foremost, money. Without a sufficient supply from the bride they decline to give up their liberty, whilst any thought of self-sacrifice, of doing with fewer luxuries, and docking one or two of their own comforts,

is hooted at as an utter absurdity. Secondly, they want good looks, good temper, and, in some cases, fair ability; and thirdly and lastly, they expect the undivided love, adoration, and respect of the lucky (?) girl they have deigned to make their wife. They, however, seldom pause to consider what they offer on their part. At least, so it appears to me, who, although belonging to the sterner sex, hold peculiar views on these subjects, different from those in vogue amongst my regimental brethren.

At forty or fifty, a man, after having lived hard, indulged in a variety of amours, and fancied himself in love a dozen times over, deems it, in his middle age, quite a natural, proper, and praiseworthy action to lay that poor old worn-out, honeycombed thing he calls his heart, at the feet of some nice, fresh young girl of eighteen. Luckily she knows nothing of his past, and is too innocent to enquire into it. Even did she do so she might not understand the dark pages it would unfold. As for the wooer, he is satisfied that his *fiancée's* life is blameless and pure, and does not trouble himself to remember what his own has been. He sees no incongruity in this association of youth with ripe experience and exhausted sensation, for, in nine cases out of ten, he looks at his bride from a purely selfish point of view. He rejoices when he thinks he has appropriated a pretty, nice, rich girl, but it never enters his head to enquire what *she* has got. If he did, the answer might often be—not much. A doubtful affection and the leavings of the many who have come before. She to him only represents one amongst dozens, he to her is everything.

These reflections had occurred to me at different times, when I saw the marriages that daily took place in the world and among my own immediate friends; and, truth to say, up to the present time they had greatly disgusted me with the bonds of Hymen. Dicky's conversation and behaviour had had much to do with this result, since, in watching his proceedings, I had seen such egotism, such calculation and

self-interest, that there were moments when I fairly pitied the young woman destined to become Mrs. Dawson.

Until I made Nell's acquaintance, no thought of marriage for myself had ever entered my mind, but now it constantly intruded and upset the even tenor of my ways. If Nell had only been a penniless girl, I might have taken heart and paid her more marked attention, but she was so horribly rich, and I—well I, I suppose was proud, and could not bear the idea of seeming to seek her for her money. The greater my love, the more repugnant did such a course appear to my secret standard of manly honour. Hence the difficulty and delicacy of the position in which I found myself. If Miss Fitzgerald had not possessed a farthing in the world, I might have said to her easily enough, "Nell, I love you. I have not much now, but I will work for you, and shall have more some day. Will you be my wife?" But, as it was, that odious wealth of hers formed a great strong bar between us, which shut my mouth and dried up in their very sources the loving words which otherwise I fain would have uttered, and which sometimes, in spite of my stern efforts at self-control, seemed as if they must burst forth in an impetuous torrent, all the fiercer for having been so long repressed.

I spent the day alone, for Dicky did not return from town until late in the afternoon, thereby missing a very fair hunting run, long but slow, and with plenty of jumping. He arrived about five o'clock, carefully carrying in his hand a large round parcel or bundle—I hardly knew what it was—wrapped up in sundry layers of cotton wool and blue paper. This article he placed upon the table with extraordinary tenderness.

"What have you got there?" I enquired, my attention being arrested by such unusually delicate handling. "Something very precious?"

"A bouquet," he replied, undoing the coverings and triumphantly displaying a gorgeous nosegay of costly hot-house flowers, whose fragrant perfume filled our

small room with sweet odours. "Do you think it a pretty one?"

"Very," I answered, feeling rather guilty. "May I ask if it is intended for Miss Fitzgerald?"

"Yes; is it likely I should waste my time and my substance on any one else? I went up to town on purpose to make sure of getting a bouquet worthy of her acceptance."

"And actually gave up a day's hunting! What devotion!"

"Do you think so, Miles?" said Dicky, looking gratified by the insinuation.

"I don't think about it, old man. You must be uncommonly far gone. Much more so than usual, I mean."

"The prize is a good one," he returned. "Three thousand a year is not to be met with every day of one's life, and it's worth taking a little extra trouble to secure."

I smothered an exclamation of indignation, and turned away. What would Dicky say if he should happen to learn that I too had sent Nell a nosegay? I wondered which of the two she would choose, his magnificent one, or my modest violets.

The doubt was soon solved, for I had not been in the ball room three minutes before the Cattington Tower party arrived, and I saw at a glance that Nell carried my gift in her hand.

"Are they not pretty and sweet?" she said to me, as I advanced to wish her good evening, and raising the flowers to my face, she made a gesture that I should smell them. "I can guess who the giver was, though he *did* so persistently keep back his name." And she shot a bright look at me as I stood before her.

"Can you?" I said with an answering smile. "Your powers of divination are too keen to render concealment possible."

"Directly I saw the violets, I knew at once that I had to thank you, Captain Mannington," went on Nell, in lower tones. "Nobody else would have remembered what were my favourite flowers."

"I feel very much flattered by your deigning to wear them, Miss Fitzgerald, especially as I believe you received another and far more beautiful offering."

Nell blushed crimson.

"Yes," she said almost apologetically, "but somehow I did not like it so much."

"Why not?"

"Why not?" with a little impatient shrug of the shoulders. "How can I tell? Because it was too grand and too formal, because it looked as if it were meant for effect, and in that respect reminded me more than was agreeable of the giver."

I laughed. How could I help being pleased at finding my gift preferred?

"And does my modesty appear so great, that you associate it in your mind with the humble violet?" I enquired playfully.

"I find it difficult to associate such a question with any modesty at all," replied Nell, with that remarkable readiness of speech which always rendered conversation with her a pleasure. For she was so quick at seizing one's thought, so good at repartee, that her brightness became communicative, and promoted a mutual interchange of witticisms.

"Tell me," I said mischievously, "what have you done with Mr. Dawson's bouquet?"

Nell cast down her eyes, and looked demureness itself.

"I could not possibly carry both his and yours," she said evasively.

"No, that would be too much to expect. You would sink under such a burden."

She laughed, the first genuine laugh I had heard her give vent to since Sweetheart's sad ending.

"I took yours because it came first," she said lightly.

"For no other reason?" And as I spoke our glances met.

The rich blood mantled in her fair cheek. It was very sweet to me to watch it creeping up.

"Pshaw!" she exclaimed, with assumed pettishness. "Why do you always want a reason for everything? Don't you know that it is a prerogative of the female sex—one of the very few they possess—to act without any reason at all?"

"I don't believe that of you, Miss Fitzgerald."

"Don't you? Well, in this instance you are right. I wanted to do a little act of grace. Miss Williams, a young lady who is staying with us, had not a bouquet. I had two, so as she is a very rich Welsh heiress, far richer than I, what more natural than to present her with Mr. Dawson's kind offering? Even the donor would feel satisfied under the circumstances."

I sighed. Nell baffled me. I could not get at the truth, not the truth, at least, such as I wanted. She would vouchsafe no explanations calculated to raise my hopes. Nevertheless there was some comfort in knowing that of her own free will she had chosen my flowers. I should have felt very mortified had I seen them passed over to Miss Williams or any other young lady for whom they were *not* intended.

"I wish you would ask Miss Williams to dance," whispered Nell in my ear. "She is only just out and knows very few people here to-night."

So saying, she introduced me to a tall dark girl in pink, whom I forthwith solicited for a waltz.

"Good evening, Miss Fitzgerald," said Dicky, joining our little group just at this juncture. "Will you give me a dance?" And he whipped out his card, for Whinboro' was too conservative not to stick to antiquated fashions, and deemed it right that the name of every young man and woman intending to trip the "light fantastic" should be religiously set down in black and white.

Nell shook her head with pretty gravity, and declared it was her intention to sit out, and not take part in the festivities of the evening. Dicky protested most vehemently, when he heard this announcement.

"Oh, come!" he exclaimed, "that won't do at all! Fancy going to a ball and not dancing! I never

heard of such a thing. Why, you will drive all your admirers to despair."

"Luckily they do not exist in such numbers as to render their desperation of any great moment," returned Nell quietly but decidedly.

"I appeal to Mr. Austen," said Dicky, with growing persistence. "His influence may prove more effective than mine."

"I think you had better dance, Nell, dear," said that gentleman persuasively. "All these young fellows will only bother your life out if you don't, and it is less trouble to give in."

"Must I?" she asked, with an interrogative look at me.

I nodded my head by way of confirming Mr. Austen's opinion.

She gave a soft sigh of resignation, hearing which, Dicky, profiting by the advantage he had gained, lost no time in putting down his name for a couple of waltzes later on in the evening.

"It will be jollier by-and-by," he said, "when the floor gets into good order, and people have begun to wake up. Things are always a bit slack at the beginning of a ball."

In spite of which he carried off Miss Williams for a quadrille, after Nell had first whispered to him what a very great heiress she was.

When they had departed, Nell turned to me and said, half comically, half sadly, "It is rather hard to be made to dance against one's will, is it not?"

"Very," I answered, "but there are a good many hard things in this world. - For instance, I am called upon to do one very shortly."

"You, Captain Mannington?"

"Yes. I had a letter from my father this morning. He wants me to go home at once. To-day is Friday, by rights I ought to leave Whinboro' at the beginning of the week."

I made the announcement abruptly, wishing to see how it affected my listener, and I tried to make her

eyes meet mine, but they remained steadily fixed on the floor. Only as I gazed at her downcast face I fancied that it changed colour. But I could not make sure, for, as if conscious of my steady glances, and apparently anxious to avoid them, she suddenly plunged the tip of her little straight nose right down into the violets.

"That is very soon," she murmured to the cool, dark flowers. "I had not begun to think about your going away yet."

"Neither had I, and I wouldn't now if I could help it. I would give anything to stay, but—" and I looked down at the slim white figure by my side, with its small round throat, and stately little head, amongst whose smooth dark tresses shone a single diamond star—"the governor says in his letter that he has not been well lately, and I feel I ought to go. What do you think?"

"About what? I am a very bad hand at thinking, and disapprove of the habit, as I told you before."

"Why, about my going, of course," wondering at her unusual want of comprehension. "I intend to abide by your advice—that is to say, if you will be kind enough to give it me."

Oh, that bouquet! Up it went again; this time to my extreme annoyance.

"Are those violets very sweet?" I asked, sarcastically.

"Yes, very."

"So sweet that you cannot even answer my question?"

She dropped the flowers slowly, and looked me straight in the face. It struck me that she was very pale; but otherwise her countenance betrayed no trace of emotion.

"Since you have asked me, Captain Mannington, I—I think that you ought certainly to go."

To me, her voice sounded curiously cold and constrained. I imagined she was weary of a subject that, to her, possessed no interest whatever.

"And this is your advice," I said, with a sinking heart. "You really mean it?"

"Yes. Sons should always prove obedient to their parents' wishes."

"A very common-place sentiment," I exclaimed, bitterly, drawing myself up to my full height; for I felt as if all my hopes had received a sudden death-blow. Her apparent indifference mortified me cruelly. If only for the sake of our so-called friendship, I thought she might have displayed a little more regret at my near departure.

"I am sorry you think it so," she replied. "You did wrong to ask my opinion, since it evidently displeases you."

"Displeases me? No, not a bit," I said with a forced laugh. "After all, it makes very little difference, since—sooner or later—I should have been obliged to tear myself away from the fascinations of Whinboro'."

"Are they so very great, Captain Mannington?"

The question angered me. It seemed a positive insult to my feelings. Whilst I resembled a volcano ready to explode at the slightest friction, she remained an icicle.

"You have lived here longer than I, Miss Fitzgerald. You know best how pleasant you have found them, and what attractions they possess for a stranger."

The words were scarcely out of my mouth before I regretted their possible interpretation. Knowing Nell's story, as I did, it was both rude and unmanly of me to refer in any way to the past.

The colour flamed up into her cheeks. I could see that she thought I was recalling the De Courcy episode, a reminiscence to which she was naturally extremely sensitive.

"Forgive me," I cried, impulsively, "I did not mean to wound you, and I—I am a perfect beast. To-day's news has regularly upset me."

"It's my fault for being so foolish," said Nell, in a low voice. "You said nothing to hurt me really."

"Yes, I did. I was cross, and I meant to be disagreeable."

"You never could succeed in being that."

"When you say such kind things, it only shows how little you know me."

"May I not say what I think, or are you ready to snap me up again?"

"I won't promise. I am in an unamiable mood to-night."

"Are you? Is that on account of your hunting being cut short?"

"Partly, but not altogether."

"Or because you don't think Mr. Dawson will prove a worthy representative in your place?"

"I have never given such a thing a thought."

"Why, then, are you put out?"

This cross-examination strained the limits of my patience.

"Shall I tell you?" I said fiercely, almost savagely, stooping my head to the level of her own.

"Yes, I am a true daughter of Eve, and am all curiosity."

"Well then, if you *must* know, it makes me mad to leave you."

So saying, without waiting to perceive what effect my rash declaration would produce, I dived into the crowd, and without having once asked her to fulfil her promise of sitting out moved hurriedly away.

She cared no more for me than she did for the man in the moon. I was a fool to be so fond of her, or to have such a heartache for her sake.

The sooner I could banish Nellie Fitzgerald from my thoughts, and prevent her from being the nucleus round which they all centred, the better. Love was a torment, a delusion, a positive madness; no man who entertained the distracting passion could be considered sane. His powers of perception, of reasoning, and of common sense, all vanished directly he became subject to Cupid's thralldom. I would throw off the chains that had held me of late, and once more assume my

freedom. Then I could afford to give Nell back coldness for coldness, and indifference for indifference.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A MODERN WOOER.

As I battled my way through the crowd of well-dressed men and women who had gathered together in honour of the Whinboro' Hunt ball, I nearly made up my mind to seek Dicky out, and persuade him not to fulfil his purpose of proposing to Miss Fitzgerald.

He would only subject himself to mortification by so doing; of that I was perfectly convinced. I almost wondered now how I ever could have been foolish enough to have felt jealous of him, since the lady troubled herself so little about either of us. We were mere casual acquaintances, to whom she was polite, because it was her nature to be civil to everybody, high and low, but whose goings and comings did not affect her in the very slightest degree. Once we had left Whinboro' she would never give us a thought.

I looked about, but could not see Dicky at the moment; and gradually, as I grew calmer and the fierce tumult of my blood subsided, I remembered that, thanks to my want of sympathy, disdain and general surliness, I was the last person from whom advice on so delicate a subject would meet with a gracious reception. Dicky would simply pooh-pooh my warning, and believe that it proceeded from interested motives. Once or twice lately, I had imagined he suspected me of being his rival, and if this were so I might just as well, to use a homely Scotch proverb, "keep my ain breath, to cool my ain porridge." The chances were I should not be believed.

No; on reflection it was better to leave Dicky alone, and let him find out the truth on his own account.

He had gone through the formula of proposing so many times already, that a refusal more or less could not make much real difference to him.

Thus deciding, I suddenly stumbled right up against the object of my thoughts, who having just deposited Miss Williams in a safe corner near a wheezy old dowager blazing with diamonds, was on the point of going in search of a fresh partner.

"Halloa! old man," he exclaimed when he saw me. "Not dancing? How's that?"

"I don't feel inclined to take the floor to-night," I answered. "I'm lazy."

"That's a pity; you really should have a turn with Miss Williams. Do you know, Miles, she is quite a nice girl. Not half a bad sort."

"Indeed! I am glad to hear it, especially as I am down for a duty dance by-and-by."

"They tell me," said Dicky mysteriously, "that she has got an awful lot of tin. Owns half the collieries in South Wales, and both parents are dead, so that she has it all in her own hands."

"Really, but it cannot possibly affect you, my dear fellow, for you are head over ears in love already, or does the two hundred thousand pounder dwarf the seventy thousand pounder, and the larger luminary throw the smaller one into the shade?"

He changed countenance and looked somewhat sheepish.

"No, no, of course not," he said hurriedly. "What on earth put such an idea into your head? I consider Miss F. is the nicest girl in the room. By-the-by, don't you think she is looking awfully pretty to-night? That sort of cloudy tulle stuff suits her down to the ground. There is only one thing that spoils her appearance, to my mind."

"And what might it be, Dicky? For my part I see nothing wrong."

"Why, her bouquet. Instead of wearing the one I sent her, which at least was a suitable finish to a lady's toilette, she has got hold of a twopenny-halfpenny

thing made of common violets;" and he curled the corners of his handsome mouth contemptuously.

"I expect Miss Fitzgerald's bouquet cost more than twopence-halfpenny," I said, with a bitter smile. "Even '*common violets*' are not to be purchased quite so cheaply."

Dicky turned suddenly upon me.

"Why, what do you know about it?" he asked suspiciously.

"Nothing much at present. Only some day the bill will be sent in for me to pay." He gave a low, protracted whistle.

"You? By Jove! So that is why she gave my flowers away to Miss Williams. I see it all now, but I must say you have kept matters uncommonly dark;" and he tugged at his fair moustache in manifest annoyance.

"You need not be afraid of me," I said quietly; "I am not likely to prove a very formidable rival. Look here, old man," laying my hand on his shoulder and yielding to a sudden impulse, "you may believe what I say, and therefore pray be guided by me when I advise you not to propose to Miss Fitzgerald. Chuck the whole thing up."

"Do you mean that you have proposed to her yourself?"

"No. I do not mean any such thing. She would not take me even if I did, and she will not take you either. Consequently, you may just as well be spared the pain of a refusal. Anyhow, you are warned of the inevitable result."

I had spoken out, on the spur of the moment, but I had scarcely done so before I regretted my words. Scorn and incredulity were depicted on every feature of Dicky's boyish face.

"Pshaw!" he exclaimed irritably. "It's the same old twaddling story that I have heard dinned into my ears every day for the last month. Can't you leave a fellow to manage his affairs in his own way, and give up croaking?"

Dicky was thoroughly angry, as I could see by his heightened colour and flashing blue eyes.

My interference had done no good, rather the reverse, and he must pay the penalty of his rashness and indiscretion.

"I spoke only for your good," I said stiffly, "but in future I promise to 'croak' no more."

So saying, we separated. Dicky immediately sought out his partner, who had been somewhat anxiously awaiting his appearance, for amongst the gay subaltern's numerous accomplishments dancing ranked not least. He was a beautiful waltzer, and as such was in great request among the young ladies.

Thus the evening wore on, and I purposely kept away from Nell's side. The feelings that caused me to remain aloof were of a mixed nature, difficult to analyze. First and foremost, I had thoroughly persuaded myself that she did not care the least bit in the world for me; secondly, pride bade me preserve an indifferent front; and thirdly, shyness made me afraid to venture near her after my ill-advised and presumptuous parting speech. Ten to one but what she would resent it as an impertinence, and testify her displeasure whenever an opportunity arose.

So, after getting through my dance with Miss Williams, who appeared to me to be an amiable, inoffensive sort of girl, I went and stood in a corner by myself, feeling very miserable and forlorn. At all times I was much more in my element in the hunting field than in the ball-room, but to-night, the noise, heat, glare and continual movement proved more than usually disagreeable, and produced an unpleasant effect upon my overstrung nerves. My weakness, too, was such that I could not help watching Nell, even although from a distance. She exercised a species of peculiar fascination over me, which I was at a loss wholly to account for.

Presently the melodious strains of a German waltz struck up, and I saw her and Dicky step forth into the circle formed by the dancers. As I said before, he was

an excellent waltzer, and so also was Nell. As they glided round the room, their steps in complete unison, I could not but confess that such dancing as theirs was the very poetry of motion. People actually stood still and looked at them admiringly as they gracefully revolved. Dicky's arm was round Nell's waist, her head rested on his shoulder, and every now and again they exchanged a few brief but apparently merry sentences.

Nell's eyes began to sparkle, her cheeks to glow. I could see, as she passed close by without noticing me, that the soft swaying music and the smooth voluptuous movement were producing a pleasurable excitement, and rapidly dissipating the sadness from which she had hitherto suffered. After all, she was young, and such things are contagious. Still, as I saw the charm working, and with each minute growing stronger and more intense, a feeling of annoyance crept over me. At length they paused in their perpetual revolutions. Nell was warm and panting, her white bosom heaved up and down with a soft, irregular motion; she leaned as if for support on her partner's arm, and the simple, confiding attitude sent daggers driving into my heart. And yet I could not withdraw my eyes, even although what I saw tortured me beyond measure, for it seemed to me that Dicky had succeeded where I had failed. He could bring the warmth to her cheek, and the smile to her lips, whilst in my presence their owner remained cold and immobile. My jealousy revived with fresh force.

"What a handsome couple those two are," said an elderly gentleman by my side to his fat, good-natured partner, whom with great energy and determination he had just succeeded in dragging round the room. "I wonder whether there is anything in it?"

"In what?" rejoined the lady innocently.

"Why, in their flirtation, of course. Have you not heard about it out hunting? Everybody is speculating as to whether matters will come to a point."

I had heard enough, and more than enough.

All of a sudden the blood rushed up to my head, and produced an unwonted sensation of dizziness. The heat and glare of the ball-room became simply intolerable.

I elbowed my way through the pleasure-seeking throng, and at last, to my great relief, reached a cool place, where perfect solitude reigned, in striking contrast to the busy, whirling, frivolous scene I had just quitted.

The spot which I had now chosen formed a kind of passage room, that communicated with an outer vestibule. It had a door at each end, through the further one of which came a current of cool air, wafted freshly in from the starry night, and it had evidently been intended to be used as a sitting-out room. A large screen was stretched across the centre so as to keep out the draught, sundry palms and flowering plants adorned the mantel-piece, and cane chairs were placed in pairs round the walls. This retreat had, however, apparently escaped the dancers' notice, inasmuch as when I entered it the room was completely unoccupied.

It seemed to offer me the repose I required and sought, and for a few minutes I stood before the hearth, gazing down at the bright blue and yellow flames of a wood fire as they leaped up the chimney. But before long, finding I still suffered from that unwonted sensation of burning heat in my head, I went behind the screen and took up a position near the outer door, where I could feel in full force the cool night air, so different from the stifling atmosphere of the ball-room.

I had not remained thus more than a few moments when I heard the sound of approaching voices, which, without much difficulty, I recognized as belonging to Dicky and Miss Fitzgerald.

"Let us sit down and rest a bit," he was saying. "This is a nice quiet place, and after our dance you must be glad of a seat. I hope you do not feel tired."

"Not in the least," she replied, in her gayest tones.

Then, with a sudden inflection of voice, she added, "Do you know, Mr. Dawson, I feel positively ashamed of having enjoyed myself so much."

"Why ashamed, Miss Fitzgerald? Enjoyment is natural, and especially so at your age."

"Because, for the time being, whilst I was waltzing and listening to the music and all that, I quite forgot about poor darling Sweetheart."

"It's no good remembering what is dead and gone," said Dicky, sententiously.

"Ah! so people say, but it seems a very hard, unkind creed to hold. To-day Sweetheart was buried. I would not hear of his going to the kennels, so we dug him a grave under the big copper beech in the park. And just to think of me, dancing and whirling about the very same evening! It really seems horrid, but it was all your fault, Mr. Dawson, and I do not think I could ever forgive you were it not that you do dance so beautifully. Somehow you contrived to make me forget my sorrows for a few fleeting moments."

"You are too complimentary, Miss Fitzgerald," replied Dicky, in a gratified tone. "I only wish I had the power to make you forget the claims of other candidates."

"In the Terpsichorean line, Mr. Dawson?"

"Exactly. I should like to waltz all the evening with you. Our steps suit, and other girls seem doubly heavy after your feather weight."

"If you favoured me to so much of your attention, I am afraid ill-natured folks might gossip," said Nell, jestingly. I had noticed ere now, that when talking to Dicky she never kept very serious for long at a time, but almost unconsciously adopted a bantering tone.

"And what if they did?"

"Oh! nothing; only, I should not like to make all the other ladies jealous. They would never forgive me for monopolizing so popular a gentleman."

"And who cares? I am sure I don't," he said, emphatically.

"I do, Mr. Dawson. I would not deprive the poor things of your society for worlds."

"When will you give up chaffing, Miss Fitzgerald? Can't you see that I am in earnest?"

"Not very well. The discovery is not exactly an easy one to make. At least, I do not find it so, but it becomes especially hard when you are in one of your flowery moods."

"And what do you call my flowery moods?"

"The complimentary vein you so frequently adopt. It is a regular habit of yours, to make pretty speeches, which you cannot possibly expect any person in full possession of their senses to believe."

The conversation had now reached a deeply interesting point, and I debated in my own mind whether I ought to withdraw, before it actually arrived at a climax. Chance had forced the part of eavesdropper upon me, and rendered it difficult to execute a retreat, without interrupting the *tête-à-tête*, and in all probability being unjustly accused by Dicky of having purposely broken in upon the conference out of spite. On the whole, I decided to remain where I was, inclination no doubt assisting the determination. And after all, I was aware of Dicky's intentions, which he had so frequently communicated to me, that I really hardly felt as if I were violating his confidences by standing my ground.

"I never say things, or make pretty speeches that I don't mean, to *you*," he replied, tenderly, in answer to Nell's last sally.

"Don't you really, Mr. Dawson?"

"No; you are not in the same category with other people, but stand on a pinnacle by yourself."

"Indeed! And may I ask why it is I am so exceptionally favoured?"

"Do you not know?"

"Should I ask the question if I did?"

"It seems to me that your own heart might tell you the reason."

"That particular organ of my body is not so com-

pliant," said Nell, with a little nervous laugh, as if she began to suspect what was coming. "Besides," defiantly, "why should it?"

The demand was an imprudent one, since it gave Dicky the opening he so eagerly desired.

"Because I love you—because I think you the nicest girl I ever met in my life—and because my one earthly desire is to make you my wife. There! now the murder is out."

A long pause succeeded this ardent declaration, so long that my curiosity was fairly awakened, and I felt an almost irrepressible inclination to peep round the corner of the screen, and ascertain for myself what the occupants of the room were about. I could fancy that I saw them. Dicky handsome, flushed, eloquent—Nell cold and scornful, with the curves of her delicate mouth drooping downwards in contempt, as once or twice I had seen them do, when her companion had unguardedly given vent to his ignoble sentiments about women.

At length she spoke. Her voice was slow and measured, and its clear tones fell with a startling distinctness that rendered every word audible.

"Mr. Dawson, you—surprise—me. Is this meant for a joke? Are you in fun?"

"Fun? Joke? No, of course not!" he protested, apparently completely taken aback by the strangeness of such a question. "Is it likely a man would jest when he realizes that all his future happiness is at stake?"

Dicky had a certain facility of speech.

"And you really wish to marry me?"

"Really and truly. I could never care for any other woman."

"You are very good, and I beg to state that I feel extremely flattered by your most kind and unexpected proposal; but——" and she stopped short.

"Oh! do not refuse me," interposed Dicky. "I am not rich, as doubtless you know, but my love is genuine, and by day and by night your image fills my heart."

"Mr. Dawson," said Nell firmly, "once for all, let me tell you that I cannot possibly accept your offer."

"This has come upon you as a surprise," he urged. "In time, perhaps——"

"No; it would be wrong to deceive you. Time will never succeed in changing my sentiments. Please understand that I do not desire to appropriate the valuable gift of your undying affection, which you so nobly and unselfishly offer for my acceptance."

There was a scornful ring in her voice as she spoke.

"At least give me another chance."

"What is the use, since my mind is made up? At the risk of offending you I will be explicit. You speak of your love. I doubt it. I am well aware that you are now simulating a passion you do not feel. You like me—you think I am good enough to marry—but you do not really care for me one bit."

"How sceptical you are!" sighed Dicky in despair. "Is there nothing I can do to prove my devotion and carry conviction to your mind?"

"Yes; you can prove it by your silence, and by retracting the words just spoken. They were foolish. Let us both forget them."

"And why should I forget them?" he said sullenly. "I said I loved you, and I stick to it, whether you believe me or not."

"Listen, Mr. Dawson. You and I have been very good friends, have we not?"

"Yes, I thought so—until to-night at any rate."

"To-night need make no difference whatever, if only you will behave like a rational and sensible being. We have laughed and jested together far too often to quarrel about such a trifle as this pretended love of yours——"

"But it is not pretended," he interrupted, hotly.

"Hush! and I will prove it to you. I believe now that I have made a mistake in treating you as unceremoniously as I did. You are young, and from the first I looked upon you as a mere boy——"

"I am four-and-twenty. I don't know when a man is grown up, if not at that age."

"Age has nothing to do with it," returned Nell, calmly. "Some people are quite old before they say good-bye to their teens, and others are like perfect babies. Anyhow, it never entered my head to think that you would be foolish enough to propose. We were *bon camarades*, nothing more."

"Pshaw! What's the use of trying to make me confess my folly now that it is too late?" he retorted, evidently much irritated by the tone she adopted.

"Better late than never. However, I do not presume to offer any advice on the subject. I only wish to place certain plain facts before you."

"I hate plain facts," growled Dicky, rudely.

"Very likely. Most people do. They possess an amount of uncompromising truth that seldom is much appreciated. The present case stands thus," she continued, with a crushing frankness, annihilating in the extreme: "I liked you, and you amused me. Your little vanities and conceits were very droll; but, in spite of them, I fancied that we understood one another perfectly. From the moment, however, you talked of love, you began to draw upon your imagination. I have studied your character to some purpose, and I know quite well that what you really love is not poor me, a simple country girl, but a dummy who represents so many golden coins a year, and so much ease, comfort and luxury. They alone are your loves. You imagine me to be rich, and think I can supply you with the things you covet—the horses, carriages, servants, hunting, shooting, and fine living. For me, personally, as an individual, as a sentient being, you do not care the least bit in the world; but what you *do* care for is my money. It, I allow, has many fascinations, but if you met another girl wealthier than I, you would propose to her by preference. Our worldly possessions are your sole thought."

"It is untrue," broke in Dicky, angrily. "I would marry you if you were a pauper."

"No, you would not. You would not do any such thing. Your blue eyes, long lashes, and pretty, curly

hair, ought to fetch their value in the matrimonial market. I hardly know whether to blame you or not for seeking to sell them for 'filthy lucre.' Anyhow, you can take consolation in this. You are undoubtedly good-looking, and possess some nice clothes, which set off your figure to advantage. With these recommendations, do not despair. Taking only a little trouble, you will probably succeed in finding a young lady more credulous and innocent than I, who am foolish enough to remain indifferent to your many attractions."

Poor Dicky was completely crushed. He attempted to mumble out something in return to this cuttingly sarcastic speech, but he failed signally in the endeavour. Nell's severe candour was too much even for *his* equanimity, whilst I, as I listened to her scornful words, felt positively sorry for the unfortunate recipient of them. No doubt it would do him a world of good, still it was hard to have such unwelcome truths said to one by a young and pretty girl.

"You are awfully down upon me," he stammered, in an almost inaudible voice. "I don't think I have deserved quite such bad treatment at your hands."

"I am very sorry," she answered more softly, as if she already repented her plain speaking, and desired to make amends. "I got carried away, and said more than I meant. Will you forgive me?"

"I will forgive you anything, if only you say I may hope."

"Mr. Dawson, I cannot do that. Why won't you understand and desist from pressing your wishes? It only gives us both pain."

"I don't suppose *you* feel much," he said moodily.

"We will not discuss that question. Everybody does not show things in the same way. Let us forget all that has taken place to-night, and then there need exist no reason why we should not be just as good friends as heretofore. Such, at least, is my wish."

"You are very kind, Miss Fitzgerald, I am

said surlily, "but it strikes me you have put an end to our friendship."

His sullenness seemed to nettle her.

"Well, if you won't be friends you won't. I can't help it, and it is not my fault. But if you really are in such a desperate hurry to get married, let me give you one piece of parting advice. Turn your attention to Miss Williams. She is both a much nicer girl and a far more more valuable prize than I. The blue eyes, &c., may do formidable execution in that quarter."

"Pish! You speak as if a person could shift about just like a weathercock," said Dicky, impatiently. Nell's consolations were clearly not altogether successful in allaying his wounded pride.

"Man, Mr. Dawson, is an adaptable creature. He readily accommodates himself to an altered state of circumstances, and constancy is *not* one of his highest virtues. And now, if you don't mind, perhaps you will be good enough to take me back to the ball-room. It is rather cold in here, and I must go and see how Miss Williams is getting on."

Dicky got up from his seat without saying a word.

As the couple vanished through the door-way, I just caught a glimpse in an opposite mirror of a very crest-fallen young masculine face, fair and gloomy, from which the usual expression of contented self-complacency had entirely departed.

I could not help thinking its owner would have done better had he taken my advice, and refrained from proposing to Nellie Fitzgerald.

Having once gone through the furnace, she had learnt to realize the difference between a genuine and a spurious passion; and, in all matters appertaining to the heart, was more than commonly sceptical.

"Once bit, twice shy" had proved a true saying in her case; and I realized now that, from the very outset, Dicky's cause had been absolutely hopeless. He never had had, and never would have, the ghost of a chance in succeeding in his designs. The very fact of Nell's

recommending Miss Williams to his notice, showed how thoroughly she understood their superficial and money-seeking nature.

And yet, after overhearing the severe snubbing Dicky had received, I felt more than ever discouraged as regarded my own suit. What hope could I possibly entertain, now that I knew the summary manner in which she dismissed every attempt at love-making? For the time being I was almost afraid of Nell, and dreaded a similar passage of arms to that which I had just overheard. If any girl had spoken to me as she had spoken to Dicky, I told myself I should sink into the ground with shame. It would be awful to hear one's shortcomings recounted with such startling truth and severity. I did not think I could ever hold up my head after going through such an ordeal.

CHAPTER XXVII.

FOR FRIENDSHIP'S SAKE.

SEVERAL minutes elapsed before I returned to the ball-room. When at length I made my way back to the scene of festivity, the very first person I saw—sitting all by herself, up in a somewhat deserted corner—was Nellie Fitzgerald.

She looked pale and tired; and as I was about to pass within a few yards, without pausing to speak, she glanced up at me with such a piteous and supplicating expression, that my heart melted immediately, and I suddenly stopped short.

"Why have you never come near me all the evening?" she said, in a low voice. "Have I done anything to offend you?"

"No, nothing," I replied. "Only with so many cavaliers about, all ready to dance attendance, it was a natural conclusion to arrive at, that my presence was not desired."

"But supposing it was—supposing I felt quite hurt by your absence?"

"I am hardly vain enough to believe that such could ever be the case."

She turned a pair of great, dark, reproachful eyes full upon my countenance. Was it the glaring candle-light that made them glisten so suspiciously?

"What is the matter with you this evening, Captain Mannington? You are not at all like yourself."

"Am I not? I am glad to hear it. No doubt the change is an improvement."

"No, it is not. I like you better when you are your own old self. The self that I know and," dropping her voice, "esteem."

"Thanks. I hope you may '*esteem*' me still more in the future; that is to say, if I profit, as I trust I will, from the very salutary though somewhat disagreeable lesson I have received to-day."

Neil looked astonished. I knew I was a brute, but I felt as if I must vent my uneasiness and depression on some one—even on the person I liked best in the world.

"A lesson!" she repeated, wonderingly. "On what subject?"

"On the folly of presumption, and hankering after what is totally beyond reach."

"I do not quite understand what you mean."

"Never mind. It is perhaps just as well that you should not."

"At least tell me one thing. Was this the reason why all throughout the evening you have treated me like a perfect stranger, and never even once asked me to dance?"

"What was the use of boring you to dance, when I heard you say you did not wish to do so, and only yielded to Mr. Dawson's solicitations under compulsion?"

"But we might have sat out."

"We might have done a great many things, Miss Fitzgerald."

She gave a little *moue* of annoyance.

"How incomprehensible you are all of a sudden! I can't think what has come to you. Surely, if I danced with Mr. Dawson, you might have known I would have danced with you?"

"My powers of deduction were not sufficiently great to arrive at that conclusion."

"Do you know, Captain Mannington, if you go on talking as you are doing, I shall grow quite angry with you. Come and sit down, and make your peace."

As she spoke she gathered her skirts close to her, with a charming gesture of invitation, which I found impossible to refuse. Up to this moment I had remained standing, in a very stiff, upright and uncomfortable position, declining to make any concessions to my pride, or rather obstinacy. My heart had felt like a stone, so dead and hard, but now it began to beat fast. Nell noticed how my whole face softened and changed. I was conscious myself of the alteration.

"Come and sit down beside me, do," she repeated coaxingly. "I am so dreadfully tired, and it will rest me to keep still for a while, and talk to a friend."

"You have really so many friends, Miss Fitzgerald, that I do not dare include myself among the number."

The words in themselves were disagreeable enough, but as I uttered them I obeyed her bidding, feeling a secret satisfaction and content once more begin to steal over me.

"Why are you so incredulous?" she asked.

"Have I not good cause to be so?"

"No, none whatever. You ought to know that by this time."

She looked at me with such a steady, honest look that my ill-humour vanished.

When distant from the girl I loved, it was easy enough to fancy all sorts of things about her, that she was cold, haughty, indifferent, an accomplished flirt and actress, but the very tone of her frank voice and the expression of her truthful eyes, put any such thoughts to flight whilst in her actual presence. She possessed

a charm and a fascination, difficult, nay, almost impossible, to withstand. A sudden impulse impelled me to make full confession.

"I fancied you did not want me," I blurted out, turning as red as a turkey cock. "I am a great, clumsy fellow at best, with no talents or conversation to entertain a clever girl like you, who has everybody at her feet. I thought I was only in the way; and that my elephantine attempts at waltzing would call forth your ridicule. Girls don't care about dancing with me as a rule. They prefer somebody more spruce and dapper, and a better hand at paying compliments."

"Who said so?" she enquired sharply.

"Oh! nobody in particular. I say so, because I know it from bitter experience."

"How can you tell whether young ladies like to dance with you or not, when you decline even to make the preliminary experiment of asking them?"

"By intuition," I returned, with a laugh, charmed by the demure coyness with which she put the question. "One can generally tell."

"It seems to me," she retorted, "that the person you call *one* makes the most egregious blunders, and carries modesty to such a point that it becomes a positive fault."

"What answer can I make to so sweeping an accusation? If I were like Dicky now——"

"Dicky!" she exclaimed impatiently, giving a disdainful shrug to her creamy shoulders. "Why do you talk of yourself and him in the same breath? You are not to be classed together. He is simply in his element on an occasion of this sort. Dance and flirt, flirt and dance, and he is perfectly happy, enjoying the supremest content of which his shallow nature is capable."

"You don't appear to think much of poor Dicky, Miss Fitzgerald."

"I did not say that, I beg pardon for having expressed my opinion so freely. I forgot for the moment that Mr. Dawson was your friend"

"Yes, and a very good fellow in many ways."

"Unfortunately, the ways are not very apparent, or else I am more than usually short-sighted."

"How severe you ladies can be to be sure. It is a lucky thing for many of our sex that we do not overhear your remarks, else our vanity would suffer a bitter blow."

"I daresay it would in some cases," returned Nell, composedly. "We don't always admire you quite as much as you think. Every now and then, when we look up at the complacent outward creature called man, and let our eyes rest on his well-cut clothes and faultless shirt front, some few of us have sense enough to say to ourselves, 'Beautiful being, behind all that gloss and glaze what is there?'"

I laughed.

"Five minutes' conversation with you would take the conceit out of the vainest fellow living. But, as far as Dicky's concerned, you can't shut your eyes to the fact that he is an immense admirer of yours."

She made a comical little grimace.

"Don't state your conviction so positively, Captain Mannington. Say *professes* to be, and you would be much nearer the mark."

"You are vexed with him about something?" I said, interrogatively, wishing to ascertain how far she was disposed to make me her confidant.

She coloured, but was too truthful to evade the question.

"Yes," she said, "I am vexed—very vexed. Mr. Dawson has managed to distress me exceedingly."

"And is that why you look so white, and say you feel out of sorts?"

"I suppose so. Don't you think this has been a very long evening?"

"Yes, rather. I can't truthfully say I have enjoyed it much up till the present; but now I don't mind how long I stay."

"Changeable individual! For my part, I wish it

were time to go home. The crowd and the noise grow wearisome after a while."

"You are not feeling well to-night."

"Oh! I don't know. I did not want to come in the first place, but when I commenced dancing I actually began to enjoy myself, until something happened which upset me altogether. Now I feel as if I should not care to go to another ball as long as I lived."

"If I make a guess, will you tell me if I am right or not?"

She nodded her head.

"Was Dicky the culprit, and the cause of your annoyance?"

"Since you ask me point-blank, yes."

"I know what his offence was," I said gravely.

"You! How can you?"

"I hope you will forgive me and not think that I listened on purpose; but I overheard every word which passed between you."

"Oh! Captain Mannington."

"I happened to be behind the screen in the passage room when you came in. I could not escape without making my presence known, and for certain reasons, which I can't explain, I did not wish to come across Dicky just then. I am glad to have told you, for I hated the idea of playing the spy. Tell me, are you very, very angry?" and I cast a penitent glance at her.

"No; I think I should have been vexed had it been any other person, but I know that you will not either make mischief or talk. Such matters are best kept secret."

"I quite agree with you, and will never allude to the subject again."

"Ahem! and was that what you meant when you said you had had a salutary but disagreeable lesson?" asked Nell shyly, preluding the interrogation with a little embarrassed cough.

"Yes. I have no wish to subject myself to a similar rebuff."

A moment before she had been as white as a lily, now she blushed rosy red.

"Was I too hard upon him?" she stammered, in confusion.

"You were very severe, although, perhaps, not more so than he deserved."

"It is a horrid thing to know people make up to you simply on account of your money."

"It must be. I often think heiresses are to be pitied on that account."

"You feel as if you never could make sure of anybody. Even those you like most, your view with suspicion."

"A very unfortunate state of affairs," I said gravely.

"Very; but how is it to be helped? I would give anything if I were not so horribly sceptical and unbelieving. Here have I been sitting for the last quarter-of-an-hour, making myself simply miserable, because I thought I had been rude and unkind to Mr. Dawson, and yet for the life of me I could not avoid feeling that his love was a sham, and his whole suit a pretence arising from interested motives. If I have wronged him I am sorry and should like to beg his pardon. We did not part very amicably, and when you have been good friends with people, even although you may no longer have the same respect for them, it always puts one out to quarrel. Tell me what you think," turning to me with that pretty deferential air of seeking a man's opinion, which is at all times so flattering to his vanity.

"I think that you need not make yourself uneasy any longer," I said, with a smile. "Look there!"

She followed the direction of my eyes and saw Dicky. He was standing talking to Miss Williams. The young lady had just dropped a bracelet, and her partner took an unusually long time clasping it on her chubby pink arm. When finally he succeeded in doing so, he extracted a flower from her bouquet—Nell's bouquet, if you please—and insisted on Miss

Williams pinning it on to his coat with her own fair fingers.

I watched this little scene with intense amusement, whilst Nell's face once more grew cold and scornful.

"You are right," she said abruptly. "I need no longer make myself uneasy, since Mr. Dawson has so quickly recovered from the wounds inflicted by my cruel tongue. For the sake of those who may come after me, I regret now that they were not deeper. We will not trouble our heads about dear Dicky any longer. Let us talk of something more interesting."

"Willingly. What topic do you choose?"

"By-the-by," she said, with sudden irrelevancy, "when do you go away? Have you really made up your mind to leave Whinboro'?"

"I am afraid so. You advised me to go, and I do not see how I could well disobey my father's summons."

She put out the point of her white satin slipper, and stared intently down at it.

"Fathers are provoking creatures."

"Exceedingly so," I returned, amused by the remark.

"And what day do you leave? You have not told me yet."

"I think on Tuesday. That would give me to-morrow's and Monday's hunting."

"The time seems to have gone uncommonly quickly. Why, it was only the other day that you arrived."

"Yes, only the other day; and yet so many events have been compressed into that short space of time, that I feel years older."

"So do I," said Nell, giving a little soft sigh. "I wonder why?"

"I know as regards myself, but I can't tell."

"Then what's the use of knowing. That does not help me."

"No, I suppose not. People generally have to find things out for themselves in this world."

"Yes, that's the worst of it. Do you ever feel as if you were standing out in the dark before a closed door, and, if only you had the key, you could go straight out from the darkness into the light. That is how I feel now, groping for something I have not got, and which I am not even sure I desire."

"I know that feeling very well. Only, in my case, I am perfectly aware of what I want, and realize I never shall get it."

"That's very unfortunate."

"Very. By-the-by, when are you coming out hunting again?"

Her nether lip began to tremble in a fashion peculiar to it.

"How can I, now Sweetheart—is—dead?"

"Could you not ride Father Christmas?"

"Yes, I could, but I don't care to. I hate pottering about with the roadsters. If one can't follow hounds properly, I would much rather stay at home. Besides which, my nerve is so completely shaken, that I do not believe I could ride a yard. Every fence I took, I should always imagine something dreadful was going to happen. Few things do away with your love of hunting so much as killing a favourite horse."

"I can well believe that, though, fortunately, I have never had the ill-luck personally to do for an animal. But I am sorry to hear what you say, for now, alas! there seems but little chance of my wish being realized."

"What wish?"

"That, before leaving Whinboro', I might have one more day's hunting with you. It is a silly fancy of mine, no doubt; but I can't bear the thought of going away without seeing you once again in your habit, just as you were the first time I ever saw you. Do you remember; you had on something brown, with a white waistcoat?"

She began toying with the fan that lay on her lap.

"What an odd idea," she said, in a low voice.

"Very; but I am an odd person altogether, as I wonder you have not discovered by this time."

"But even if I were to come out hunting it would not be of much use."

"Why not?"

"I should not see much of you. You, as usual, would be flying at the tail of the pack, and I"—with a sudden unsteadiness of intonation, "I should be forced to stick to the roads. No more water-jumping for me," giving a melancholy smile. "Times are sadly changed."

And the tears welled up into her eyes.

"After to-night's ball we shall have a monster meet," I said, "and the chances are, hounds will not show much sport. Anyhow, knowing the country as you do, you will manage to get along all right. I would offer you a mount on The Siren, only she is hardly a safe animal for a lady, and I doubt whether Mr. Austen would allow you to ride her."

"I am sure he would not," interrupted Nell.

"But Father Christmas is quite trustworthy, and if you will only come, I promise to take care of you."

"I don't feel as if I could," she protested. "My heart is no longer in the work, and I keep on thinking of Sweetheart."

But the more she demurred, the more persistent grew I. Somehow or other I had a curious presentiment that this was my last chance, and that to-morrow would prove an eventful day, destined to decide my fate.

"Miss Fitzgerald," I pleaded, "you were good enough to say once that you considered me your friend. For the sake of that friendship I now ask you to make a sacrifice, and do violence to your own feelings. I am going to India in the spring. It is quite possible that after I leave Whinboro' I may never see you again—not that I shall forget you on that account. To oblige me, and as a personal favour, will you come out hunting to-morrow?"

She once more began playing with her fan, and raising it to her face concealed her tell-tale mouth and sweet, tremulous lips.

"Well?" I said persuasively, and as I spoke I literally compelled her eyes to meet my steady gaze.

What she read in them I don't know; but she turned quite white, gave a shiver as if trying hard to oppose some unusual forces working within her bosom, and then hid her face completely.

"Little friend, dear little friend," I whispered, taking care to employ a term which, though it sounded cold and tame in my ears, was one which I knew would not frighten her. "The probabilities are I may never ask another favour of you as long as I live. You will come to-morrow, won't you?"

And I held out my hand.

She let the tips of her dainty fingers rest on my big, broad palm.

"Yes," she said, so softly that I could hardly hear the word. "I would do anything to please you in return for your goodness to me."

"God bless you, Nell!" I cried, crushing her little hand in mine. "It is something even to be the friend of such a girl as you."

Just at this moment Mr. Austen came up.

"Nell," he said, "I have been looking for you. We are going. I ordered the carriage early because I knew you would not care to stay very long."

"Yes, uncle," she answered, rising from her seat. "I am quite ready."

She was all of a tremble. Her limbs quivered like an aspen leaf.

"Will you not have a glass of wine before you go?" I asked.

"No, thank you," she replied, "I would rather get home."

"Perhaps I ought not to have brought her here to-night," said Mr. Austen to me, in an undertone. "She has not been herself ever since that bad business about

poor Sweetheart, but I thought seeing all her friends would rouse her up a bit."

"She is tired, and wants rest," I replied. "She will feel better by to-morrow."

So saying, I tucked her up under my arm, took her to the cloak-room, wrapped her shawl carefully round her, and conducted her to the carriage.

"Good-bye," I said, as I stood bare-headed under the starry heavens, and felt the cool night air fanning my cheek. "Don't forget your promise."

"No, I won't forget," she said, with a sigh and a dreamy smile, and then left me to ponder on the curious inconstancy of man's resolutions.

An hour ago, whilst I listened to poor Dicky receiving his dismissal, I had almost vowed to have nothing more to do with Nellie Fitzgerald, to keep out of her way, and to banish her from my thoughts; and now, here I was, more madly in love than ever, and much nearer declaring my passion than on any former occasion.

She had promised to meet me out hunting on the morrow, and every pulse in my frame thrilled with delight at the idea.

Oh! the strange and compelling impetuosity of love! It sweeps away sense, reason, and philosophy, just as the cold north wind on a chill autumnal day drives the withered leaf before its stormy currents, whirling the little dead yellow object hither and thither in every direction.

The leaf is quite powerless, and so also is the man who falls victim to Cupid.

Once, I had prided myself upon a certain force of will; now my life seemed taken out of my own hands, and to be at the mercy of an irresistible influence which threatened either to make or mar it.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

LIKE ALL THE OTHERS.

ON the day succeeding the Hunt Ball, the invariable custom was, for the Whinboro' hounds to meet within a couple of miles or so of the town, thus affording an opportunity to the many strangers, who congregated from far and near in honour of the festivity, to have a glimpse of the celebrated pack.

Unfortunately the morning broke wild and stormy. A terrific wind swept the uplands, playing havoc with the unprotected trees, and sending their naked twigs flying in every direction. Dark clouds, almost inky in colour, obscured the heavens, and threatened momentarily to discharge their moisture-laden contents. In fact, matters did not augur well for the chase, by any manner of means, and doubtless it was owing to the unpropitious state of the weather that comparatively such a small number of people assembled at the meet. The regular *habitués* turned up of course, but there were very few fresh faces to be seen amongst the ranks.

Dicky and I started somewhat late, after our dissipations of the previous evening. As we jogged along to covert, the pitiless wind whistled in chill blasts about our ears, causing our very horses to shrink and sidle from its icy currents.

"I say, old chap," exclaimed Dicky, in a voice subdued by physical misery, "this is hardly good enough, is it?"

"Hardly," I replied between my teeth. "I confess that there are certain days in the season when even the most inveterate fox-hunter going is fain to admit he would have been better off had he stayed at home, and regrets the warm, comfortable fireside which he has been rash enough to exchange for the fury of the elements. However, now we are out, let us hope for the best. Perhaps things may improve by-and-by."

I was determined to look at matters from as cheerful a point of view as possible. Thunder and light-

ning would not have kept me at home on this particular morning.

"Humph! There is much room for improvement," responded Dicky, as his unfortunate horse almost stopped, tucked his tail between his legs, and began to tremble violently.

We rode on for a short way in silence, then Dicky suddenly startled me by saying:

"Do you know, Miles, I've half a mind to leave Whinboro' when you do."

"What! On Tuesday next, as ever is?"

"Yes; I'm getting tired of this place."

"Tired enough to give up your hunting?"

"Almost. It would be beastly slow work staying on, all by oneself."

I cast a sidelong look in his direction.

"But you know lots of people, and have made any amount of acquaintances. Take your friends at Cattington Towers, for instance. Surely they will prevent you from feeling dull?"

He turned rather red at this speech, and gazed intently at his horse's ears.

"Ahem!—I don't know that I should care to go there, even if I were asked."

"Indeed! I am surprised to hear you say so. You seem to have completely altered your mind since yesterday."

"Perhaps I have." Then with a sudden burst of candour, he added, "To tell you the truth, Miles, I am disappointed in Miss Fitzgerald. She is not what I thought."

"Disappointed! How's that?"

"Oh, I don't know. I thought she was a jolly, good-natured, cheery sort of girl, instead of which she turns out to be a rude, airified, stuck-up thing, who fancies herself no end, and does not behave with even ordinary civility."

This was too much for my patience. I could not let Nell be thus disparaged in my very hearing, without showing some signs of displeasure.

"Now, look here, Dicky," I said sternly, "I know quite well what has taken place."

"Do you? You are remarkably sharp then," he sneered in return.

"Yes, you have proposed and been refused; an occurrence which any one could have foretold. However, that has nothing to do with the matter in hand; and all I can say is, that it is precious mean and ungentlemanly of you, after lauding Miss Fitzgerald up to the skies, and paying her any amount of attention, to suddenly turn round and abuse her like a pick-pocket, simply because she has had the good sense to decline the questionable honour of becoming Mrs. Richard Dawson. The least a man can do, under such circumstances, is to hold his tongue and refrain from saying a single word against the lady." And I stared him severely in the face.

He looked rather foolish at being thus straightforwardly attacked.

"It's all very fine talking," he mumbled out in reply, "and, naturally, a girl has the right to refuse you if she chooses, but it depends entirely upon *how* a thing is done."

"Exactly, I quite agree with you; and I happen to know that the thing, as you call it, was exceedingly well done. You refused to listen to my advice, and simply got what you richly deserved. The young lady had a perfect right to give you a piece of her mind."

"Do you approve of downright rudeness, then?"

"Miss Fitzgerald was *not* rude, Dicky. She never could be so, under any circumstances whatever. You laid yourself open to a rebuff, and received one, that was all."

"It is not right for girls to hurt people's feelings. They should be more considerate."

"Pooh! Your feelings? Why, ten minutes after you had proposed to Miss Fitzgerald, you were flirting away with Miss Williams as if nothing at all had happened."

"She's a very nice girl, that—a *really* nice girl—Miles," said he, with an emphasis which provoked me, for it seemed to imply a superiority over Nell.

"She may or she may not be," I replied curtly. "But one thing I do know for certain, namely, that you are the most arrant heiress-hunter in creation, and the wonder to me is, that you have not received many a good snubbing long ere now. It only shows how kind and forbearing the young ladies are."

Dicky hung his head, and appeared thoroughly ashamed of himself, as, indeed, he well might be. Thanks to his youth, and a certain amount of natural good-feeling, he had not yet grown callous to reproof.

"You can understand my not caring to stay on at Whinboro'," he said, after a bit.

"Perfectly. I rather respect your resolve than otherwise; but please don't run down Miss Fitzgerald in my presence, for, I give you full notice, that that is a thing which I neither can nor will put up with. Don't blame others for your own faults, and at least show some generosity in defeat."

He turned and looked at me. I could feel myself changing countenance under his questioning gaze, though I tried hard to bear it unflinchingly.

"Why!" he exclaimed, with a low whistle, "I do believe you are spooney on her yourself."

"It does not much signify what you believe," I said, in tones of annoyance, vexed beyond measure that now, at the eleventh hour, he should have guessed my secret. "Miss Fitzgerald is no more likely to take me than she was to take you. As far as that goes we are both in the same boat together."

"And an uncommonly cranky craft it is," chimed in Dicky, "which I, for one, shall be glad to leave; and the best thing we can do is to clear out of Whinboro' altogether."

"What are your plans?" I asked. "Have you made any?"

"Mine? Oh, I shall move the gees, and finish what remains of my leave at Rugby."

"Rather a disastrous finale to our pleasant anticipations," I said, with a mournful smile. "Things have turned out differently from what we expected."

"Very. But what is to be done? Can you suggest anything better?"

"No. Perhaps you are right to go. The hunting here has been awfully jolly, and I, for one, shall always look back to it with pleasure. I don't regret having come to the Shires for a minute. The sport is all that could be desired, but—" and I hesitated as I thought how those few short weeks spent at Whinboro' had altered my whole frame of mind, and all the current of my future life.

"Ah! that's just it," said Dicky, shaking his head. "There's always a but—a horrid, malicious little but, which effectually manages to spoil one's enjoyment on every possible occasion."

"Yes, old fellow," I responded. "So goes the world, and, all things considered, I believe it is wiser for both of us to pack up and leave on Tuesday."

As we arrived at this determination, we reached the village, at which the appointed meet took place. The day had not improved, and was now so exceedingly rough that I entertained secret uneasy doubts as to whether Nell would muster up sufficient courage to face the elements, especially as she evidently had not been feeling very well on the previous evening.

My fears on this score were, however, promptly set at rest, for I had hardly had time to look round, when she trotted briskly up on her white cob, Mr. Austen and Miss Williams following more leisurely, a few yards in the rear.

"I was beginning to think you would not come," I said, after the first salutations had been exchanged between us. "The hounds are just making a move."

"I promised," she said simply, evidently considering that, having once done so, nothing but some very strong reason could have justified her not keeping her word.

"But it is such a day! Ugh!" giving a shudder of disgust as a chill blast swept round the corner,

"Not a very nice one, certainly, but I am not made of sugar, to melt at the first drop of rain. We sporting people have to put up with the weather."

She tried to speak cheerily, but I could see that she was far from being in good spirits. Her eyes lacked their usual brightness, and her cheeks their colour. When I looked at the heavy clouds, I almost regretted having been the means of bringing her out.

"I am afraid we shall have a regular downpour before long," I remarked.

"It looks like it," said Nell. "I am sorry for all the unfortunate strangers, as I am afraid we shall not be able to show them much sport."

As the morning advanced, it appeared as if her prediction would come true, for several fine coverts were drawn blank—a circumstance which as usual gave birth to a vast amount of unfavourable commentary and adverse criticism, for which the owner of the coverts in question came in for more than his full share. At last, Reynard was discovered in an outlying spinny, but although the hounds got away close at his brush, they could not run him a yard. Scent seemed entirely deficient.

Nothing is so discouraging for a huntsman as to be more than usually anxious to afford the Field a run, and yet to discover, as the day wears on, that all the necessary requisites to attain that desirable result are totally wanting. Wind, rain, no smell, and what can a poor man do? Even the most scientific professional is baffled at times.

Tim Burr stuck to it like a Briton, but without much success. The Fates were clearly not in a propitious mood, and Pug, after a slight expedition, returned in safety to the snug undergrowth of the spinny.

The cold meanwhile was extreme, and reminded one more forcibly than was pleasant of the Arctic regions. Every one looked, even if he did not *feel*, miserable. Noses were purple; hands bereft of all sensation except pain, and feet like lumps of ice, wholly destitute of warmth. The charms of hunting are great; nobody

admits them more freely than myself, but it would be impossible to deny that there is a reverse side to the picture. Days when no stirring gallop or good hunting run compensates you for the wettings, the misery, and dire physical discomfort you have to undergo. Even the keenest sportsmen are forced occasionally to confess this fact, and the morning after the Whinboro' Hunt Ball was just one to make you feel that the pursuit of the fox—delightful as it is under favourable conditions—is not always all *colour de rose*. To render matters worse, and to add to the wretchedness of the assembled multitude, about one o'clock it came on to pour with rain.

Now there is rain and rain.

A mild, steady drizzle, accompanied by a soft air, although it may not be exactly pleasant, and may even wet you through and through, is not productive of any great harm; but when the rain descends like a water-spout, whose force makes your face literally smart, and soaks you to the skin in two or three minutes; and when, moreover, it is accompanied by a cutting wind, which induces the teeth in your head to rattle with cold, then the wise man throws up the game and seeks shelter.

In the face of such a storm as now came on, it was simply impossible to hunt, and a place of refuge was consequently the order of the day. Gathering his hounds together with a ringing call, the huntsman made off at a hand-gallop to some farm buildings that happened to be within a few hundred yards. Helter-skelter, every one followed his example, and the rush to reach them was so great that, although Nell and I—who were riding together at the time—made all speed, we found on our arrival that every inch of available space was already occupied.

A groom was holding Mr. Austen's and Miss Williams' horses. Foreseeing a bad shower, they had dismounted, it appeared, and sought shelter inside the house until the storm abated, leaving word to Nell to do likewise, but she was far too good a sportswoman to shelter her-

self and leave her horse to his fate. She scorned the very idea.

"Really, you had better dismount," I said, fearful lest she should take cold.

"I should not think of leaving Father Christmas out in the rain," she answered, decidedly.

"But I may succeed in finding him a place."

"If you do, well and good; but until then, I will stay where I am."

It was raining cats and dogs; and, from the look of her habit, I could see that it wanted very little more to wet it through entirely.

"It really is foolish of you, Miss Fitzgerald," I urged in despair.

"Very likely," she replied calmly. "But who is wholly wise in this world?"

I looked round, and at that moment, to my great relief saw, removed from the main building, a little tumble-down cowshed, standing by itself in the middle of a field.

"Come along," I cried to my companion. "Let us take possession before the rest of the company appear."

In a minute we stood outside the door, and I jumped from The Siren. The roof was too low to allow of our remaining on horseback; but by a little management it was just possible to lead the nags through the aperture. It was much too wet to stand on ceremony, so, taking Nell bodily in my arms, I lifted her to the ground.

The shed was a very small one, and appeared as if intended for a couple of invalid cows who required to be isolated from their companions. Anyway, such was the impression conveyed to my mind. The wooden beams that supported it were low, and almost touched the mare's head, whilst sundry cobwebs ornamented the corners. A shallow manger, in which were the remains of some hay, ran along one side of the shed, and into this our horses plunged their muzzles, and began munching as best they could, with their bits on,

at the not over sweet-smelling remnants of a bye-gone meal.

Nell sat down on the rim of the manger, and commenced to play with the lash of her hunting-crop. She seemed a little embarrassed, and altogether not quite like herself—at least so I fancied, though it might have been only my imagination. We were all alone, and I rather enjoyed the situation than otherwise. For once I felt as if there were nobody to come between us, and that for a few fleeting minutes she was my own peculiar property. The sensation sent a thrill of pleasure through my frame.

"H'm! we were only just in time," I remarked, as the figures of a couple of disconsolate-looking horsemen passed before our shed. "Poor fellows! we would take them in if we could, but we can't. A third person could not possibly squeeze into this little miserable shanty. There is only just room for our horses as it is."

"We may congratulate ourselves on our good fortune," said Nell, "and also that Father Christmas and The Siren are so amicable."

"Like their owners," I returned with a smile, sitting down on the manger by her side and drawing a little nearer.

"They have made friends already," she said, unheeding the remark, as our steeds rubbed their heads together and nibbled at each other's manes.

Just then a sudden gust of wind and rain made our slight shed shake as if it were going to fall to the ground.

"What a day!" I exclaimed. "It really is not fit for you to be out in such weather, and I blame myself for having selfishly asked you to come."

"You need not have any misgivings, Captain Mannington. I very seldom stay at home on account of the rain."

"But you ought to. You might catch cold."

"Even if I did, such a very slight misfortune could hardly be looked upon as much of a calamity."

"You say so—I think otherwise. It seems to me that you do not take any care of yourself whatever."

She gave a careless shrug of the shoulders.

"Why should I? To take care of oneself argues a certain amount of self-love. When you have none, and the life or death of number one appears to you a matter of no importance, why coddle and fuss?"

"You should not talk like that," I said seriously.

"Why not? With the exception of Uncle Austen, I do not believe there exists a single person who cares for me really—for my own self, I mean—in the world."

"How can you say such a thing, Miss Fitzgerald?"

"Because it is true. A few people—like your friend Mr. Dawson for instance—*profess* to be fond of me; but what is their fondness worth? It only has a depressing effect on my spirits."

And she laughed a bitter laugh.

I could not bear to hear her give vent to such sentiments. Besides, there was a half-mournful, half pathetic look on her face which went straight to my heart.

"I know one person, at any rate, who loves you for your own sake," I said impulsively.

"Do you?"

And she glanced shyly at me, then quickly averted her gaze.

The knowledge that I was on the point of parting from her gave me courage, whilst the sense that we were quite alone, for the last time, perhaps, in our lives, inspired me with a species of desperate boldness.

"Yes," I said, taking her hand in mine as I spoke, "I do. I did not mean to tell you; but circumstances are too strong for me. Nell," edging up nearer to her side, "I love you better than my life. I would go through fire and water to serve you. These are conventional words, but they are not conventionally meant, and my only wish is that you had not one silver sixpence to rub against another. For if it were not for appearing to seek your money and not yourself, I could speak out all

that is in my mind. I could tell you how I have never cared two straws for any other woman, and how from the first moment I set eyes on your sweet face, my heart went out from me on the spot."

She gave a kind of suppressed sob, and I continued, vehemently: "No, don't turn away and try to silence me by hiding your face. I have been quiet so long that, now I have begun to tell my story, nothing can stop me. I can't help caring for you, I only wish I could; for I know that I have not the ghost of a chance, and that this love of mine is pure folly. Nevertheless, you must listen to me just this once. Oh, Nell, my darling," looking piteously at her, with yearning eyes, "do not be angry, for indeed—indeed I cannot help myself."

"I am not angry," she interrupted faintly. "Only, it is such a pity."

"Mark you, I do not presume to ask you to become my wife—you, who are worthy to be a young princess. My cause is hopeless, and I have nothing to say in my own defence, except that the sterling love of an honest man is a thing that no woman need feel ashamed of having inspired. Oh, Nell! Nell!" raising her little hand to my lips, and pressing fierce, miserable kisses upon it, "at least forgive me for loving you so much, and having dared to tell you of my love——"

I paused, breathless. Big, strong man as I was, my limbs positively trembled, and for the moment I felt as weak as a baby.

She turned and looked at me, with the tears starting to her eyes. One instant she looked like yielding, then an expression stole over her face I could not understand—an expression of tenderness battling against some opposing sentiment—of belief and yet repression.

"Oh, don't, don't!" she cried sharply, as if I had wounded her in some vulnerable part, withdrawing her hand as she spoke, and lifting it with a half-supplicating, half-warning gesture, "I have liked you so well—I *do* like you so well, and now," dropping her voice to a

whisper, "you are bringing yourself down to the same level as all the others."

She was unjust. Her words stung me to the very quick. I do not believe it possible for a man to feel more bitterly humiliated and misunderstood than I did as I listened to her speech.

"Enough!" I retorted hastily. "You think I am seeking you for your wretched money. I will not say another syllable."

She must have known she had made a cruel mistake, since a bright flush stole to her face.

Are women so dense that they cannot detect the real from the false?

"I—I don't know," she stammered. "It is difficult to judge, and I'm afraid to believe anybody now-a-days."

"So it seems," I said scornfully; "but let me tell you, once for all, you carry your scepticism too far. Some day it will rebound upon yourself."

"You promised to be my—friend, Captain Mannington. I—I thought that I was quite safe with you."

"Good God! And so you are. What do you take me for, pray, a blackguard?"

"I meant that—that——" hesitating.

"Well, what?" I asked, impatiently.

"That there would never be any talk of—of—love between us."

She turned her head away as she spoke the last words, so that I could not see her face.

I was wounded to the very core, and yet I would not let her guess what a death-blow she was dealing me. Pride came to my assistance and helped to hide my despair.

"Listen, Miss Fitzgerald," I said, haughtily. "What I have promised that will I perform. Henceforth, though the seas may divide us, though the years roll over our heads, and our paths lie far apart, you will always remain the same to me. I cannot forget you. But I make a solemn vow never again to offend by speaking of my love. From to-day it shall be as if it had not existed; and, if you will still have me for

your friend, I will be your friend. When you are in trouble, when you need sympathy, counsel or encouragement, then turn to me, and you shall see if I am capable of keeping my word or not. And now, dear," with a sudden break in my voice, as affection once more conquered wounded pride, "I wish you good-bye—to me, a long and sad good-bye. After a fashion, you have misjudged me sorely; and yet, knowing what I do, I cannot altogether wonder at it. Man has treated you badly, and you cannot bring yourself to believe in him. I shall not see you after to-day; but, when I am far away, give me a kind thought occasionally. God bless you, Nell! You will marry somebody more worthy of you than I, though, even if he be a peer of the realm, he cannot love you better."

The rain no longer fell so heavily. The great, fast drops were moderating, and the lowering clouds parted, and showed glimpses of lighter grey sky. But, in my present frame of mind, I cared very little for the elements. In fact, I heeded them not. I was like a man dead to outward impressions. I only knew that Nell had rebuked and rejected me; and I panted for air—for space.

She did not speak again. Once or twice she seemed on the point of doing so; but a great struggle appeared raging within her bosom, and the words, each time, died away on her lips, and melted into inarticulate sound. Her face was white as snow, and the tears still glistened in her large dark eyes. I could not trust myself to gaze on the sweet features I loved so well. A madness seized me. A fierce desire to embrace her before I left, so that the touch of her warm lips might linger hereafter in my memory.

"Nell," I pleaded, "will you give me a kiss? Just one before I go? It is a small thing for you to concede, but it will be my greatest treasure in the future." I could have taken the boon I craved, without asking, but, unless freely given, I felt that I should not value it in the same degree. There was a silence, during which I could almost hear my heart beat. "Will you,

Nell?" I repeated, softly. "Oh! my darling, don't be so hard-hearted!" And then it seemed to me that a shudder passed through all her frame. My pride was up in arms immediately. Was I so obnoxious to her as all that! Ah! blind fool that I had been! "Never mind," I said, stiffly; "it is of no consequence. I—I beg your pardon." Whereupon, without once considering the rudeness I committed, in leaving her alone and dismounted, I seized The Siren by the bridle and dragged her out of the shed.

For the remainder of my life, that shed would for ever remain imprinted on my brain. The wind caught us in a boisterous blast, and, for a second, prevented me from mounting, but the next moment I was firmly seated in the saddle. Was it my fancy which, just then, made me imagine I heard a soft, tremulous voice call out—"Oh, Miles, Miles! I did not really mean what I said. Do come back to me again."

Yes, it must have been; for, when I took one farewell glance at Nell, how else could I have seen her, standing up in the shed like a statue, seemingly bereft of life or sensation, with hands tightly clasped, and eyes straining into vacancy.

I dug my spurs into The Siren, and galloped off at hap-hazard, just in time to see huntsman and hounds emerge from the farm-buildings, intent upon finding a fresh fox. And, with a sinking spirit and a heart like lead, still the clouds overhead lightened and parted till a peep of azure blue sky shone out.

Oh, mockery of nature! Oh, cold, cruel, never-heeding mother! Hast thou no sympathy for thy poor earthly children in their dark hours? No fellow-feeling with them in their misfortunes? It seems not. The sun shines upon our bitter woe, the soft air laughs at our deepest agony, and the calm firmament of space, with its vast and silent serenity, scoffs at our transient human passions. Love, joy, sorrow, grief, what matters it? The end-all is the same. And still the birds sing, the mild winds blow, the flowers bloom, and the cold, pure stars shine out.



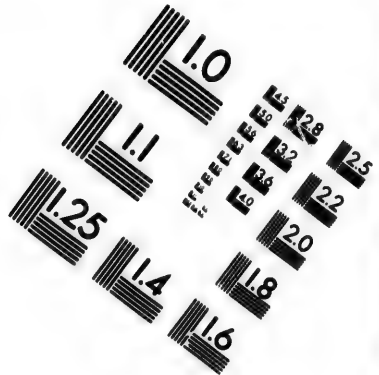
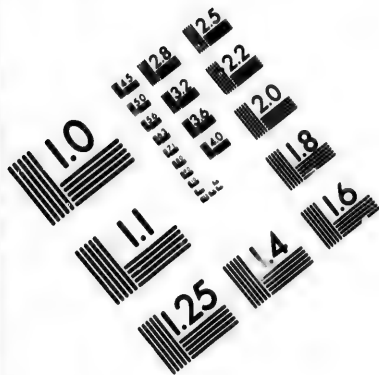
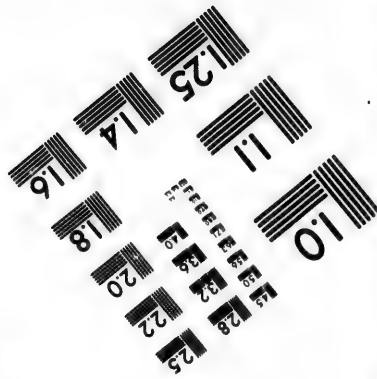
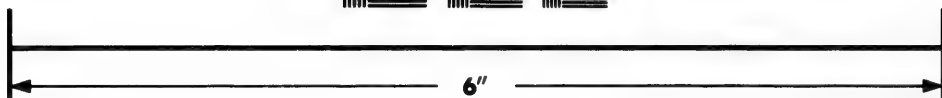
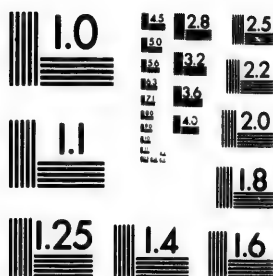


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CHAPTER XXIX.

'WAR WIRE.

I WAS mad, miserable!

I knew now for certain that, in spite of my pacificatory assurances to Dicky as to the utter improbability of Nellie Fitzgerald accepting me, even were I rash enough to propose, I had all along been buoyed up by a still, small voice, which whispered that I was not wholly indifferent to the girl.

Her kind words, gentle looks, and friendly demeanour, had raised my hopes to an extent that I was not actually aware of, until, by one sharp and undeceiving speech, they received a death-blow, effectually calculated to prevent their ever again finding a dwelling-place in my breast.

She had not deceived me; I had deceived myself; gathering encouragement where no cause for encouragement existed, and fancying a tenderness where there was none. What castles in the air I had built! They had not the slightest foundation on which to rest, so they tumbled to the ground with a crash, leaving me to recognize my folly. Bitterly, indeed, did I repent that in a moment of weakness, a sudden impulse, which, at the time, seemed uncontrollable, had swept before it all the sager resolutions so rigidly adhered to in my calmer moods.

And what had been the result? In what estimation did Nell hold me?

She had listened in silence, if not disdain, to my passionate declaration of an undying affection, and when, breathless, I paused for an answer, my whole spirit hanging on the words likely to issue from her mouth, she had, with her own lips, told me that I was simply stooping to the same level as the many other men who from time to time had made her similar professions of love.

To a genuine lover, conscious of the purity and dis-

interestedness of his motives, what accusation could possibly be more galling?

It did not signify that I knew the imputation to be false. I had no means of proving my sincerity, besides, it was enough, after the bond of friendship exchanged between us, that she should hold me in such poor esteem, and have formed so unfavourable an opinion of my character.

Her admirers must have been very mean specimens of the race, to have left such a bad impression on her mind. But I knew I was honest and true, which made her scorn all the harder to bear.

For she *had* scorned me, and, after what had just taken place, I felt positively reckless. When I looked into the future, it seemed all misty and dark. I could discern no single ray of light to illumine the lowering clouds, hemming it in on every side.

As in a dream, I followed the hounds, giving short mechanical answers to Captain Hooper and those of my acquaintances who spoke to me from time to time. Their common-place conversation annoyed me greatly.

Small every-day observations fall terribly flat, when you have just gone through a crisis in your existence which wrings your soul to the very core, and leaves all your faculties dull, dead, and inert. To be blandly informed that the day is wet or dry, that Mrs. A.'s new habit is not a success, and wrinkles in the skirt, or that Mr. B.'s horse is pulling him double, and, in the speaker's estimation, requires a totally different kind of bit, are not topics that prove congenial when your whole being is rent by a tumult of conflicting emotion. You cannot get up the proper interest, and the anecdotal-biographical style of discourse, which forms the backbone of ordinary people's remarks, is peculiarly exasperating to the nerves when they are in a state of the highest tension.

Nevertheless, I endeavoured to endure the loquacious attentions of my friends with an outward show of civility to which my inward condition gave the lie direct. Somehow the small-talk of the good and ex-

cellent world appears very, very small, and even more trivial and frivolous than usual, when we are once fairly carried out of ourselves. On the present occasion it reminded me of the constant buzzing of a fly, and produced the same irritating and monotonous effect. For it *is* irritating when for about the dozenth time, a person comes up to you and says in a light, indifferent manner, which clearly shows how little your departure really affects him, "What, going away, old man? So sorry—wish you could have stayed."

Fortunately, the natural pride with which man is endowed, is so strong that it enables him to conceal his inward sufferings with heroism. He cannot bear the general public to guess at them, and manages to don a mask of impenetrability which frequently deceives even those who know him best.

For few people are aware what that ever moving mass of varied thought termed the inner life really consists of. They do not suspect the dreams, fancies, hopes, longings and wishes that find a resting place in the secret crannies of the brain, and fewer still possess the sympathy requisite to probe down into its darkest depths. In some ways society is kind. It takes no notice of your wound, but glances casually at the surface, and judges folks entirely by what it there sees revealed.

We had some way to go to the next covert, and for three terribly long and weary miles I managed to conceal the volcano raging within me, to answer questions, and even hazard an occasional remark, when the circumstances appeared to demand a conversational effort on my part. But it was hard work, and I suffered purgatory.

When at last a halt was sounded by the side of a long plantation, I rejoiced heartily that an opportunity presented itself of slipping off with the second whip, and so escaping from the garrulity of my acquaintances.

We splashed down a heavy ride, our horses sinking almost up to their hocks at every step, and, when we

had gone about halfway, I took a hasty backward glance to see if we were being pursued. That glance revealed to me a glimpse of a straight girlish figure, seated on a white cob, who walked quietly past the bridle gate by which we had entered the wood. I pushed by the whip, and regardless of his admonitions, never drew rein until I reached the other side of the plantation, which I occupied in solitary glory, taking a melancholy pleasure in my isolation.

I am not naturally a coward, but I believe that I was positively afraid to face Nellie Fitzgerald. Were I to meet her by herself, I felt that I might no longer be responsible for my actions. I was mad and I knew that I was mad; but I was desperate as well, and in my desperation might utter reproaches unworthy of a gentleman.

The minutes passed by, but I had ceased to take any count of the time. I knew not whether it was morning or evening, early or late. I had fallen into a brown study of the most melancholy and despondent description, when suddenly a loud yell uttered by a couple of labouring men, stationed on a neighbouring hill, gave the welcome intelligence that Pug was afoot, and unperceived by the field at large, had stolen quietly from the covert, trying to secure his escape before the hounds had even winded him.

With admirable promptitude, Tim Burr gathered the pack together, and giving a ringing cheer, laid them on to the line of the departed fox. A musical outbreak of joyous voices, at once gave full corroboration to the information imparted by the lustily shouting yokels. Meanwhile, the wind had moderated considerably. The heavy clouds had rolled away, for a brief space the sun shone out, and it really seemed as if there might be a chance of having a run yet.

The field were evidently of that opinion, for its members charged down, full of ardour and gallantry at the nearest gateway, and completely succeeded in blocking up the narrow aperture. Horses kicked and laid back their ears, men swore, squared their elbows and

jostled each other, but for nearly five minutes progress became a matter of impossibility.

I had been forced to gallop at topmost speed round the covert side, in order to get to the starting point, and was in no mood for waiting patiently amongst the throng. A huge black bullfinch ran by the sides of the gate. Except just at the top, it looked as black as night, and must have been nearly six feet in height. No sane person would have ridden at such an obstacle; but I was not sane, and a house would not have stopped me in my present mood. I crammed my hat down hard on the back of my head, bent well forward in the saddle, and set The Siren at the bullfinch. As I did so, I heard a quiet, sarcastic voice from amongst the crowd say: "By Jove! the man must be a lunatic!"

But lunatic or no lunatic, I was determined to get over somehow. In spite of the bleakness of the day, my blood was literally at fever heat, and I felt ready to go at any mortal thing. What if I *did* break my neck?

Would it not be the very greatest mercy that could possibly be vouchsafed to so miserable a wretch as I? What was the use of living, when one had no pleasure in life, and sickened at the mere thought of the long, miserable days to come? I was hard on The Siren, no doubt; nevertheless, I think there were some excuses to be made for me. Perhaps she possessed more sense than her master, for, not relishing the black wall in front of her, she swerved sharply to the left. I rode her at it again, and this time literally forced the poor beast right into the dark, unyielding mass.

For several seconds she tottered, as if it were just touch and go whether she would fall back or not, whilst her forelegs pawed the air; then giving a series of desperate flounders, she gradually succeeded in boring a hole through the sharp, cruel thorns, and finally half tumbled, half jumped into the field beyond, tearing my hunting crop clean out of my hand, and inflicting several long red scratches on my face. But I did not stop to pick up my lost property.

The hounds were not far ahead, puzzling out the

scent, and every now and again flashing eagerly forwards at a pace which looked as if they meant running; besides, I was in a regular devil-may-care mood.

All round about the covert where we had started our fox, lay the biggest, nastiest, and most unnegotiable bit of country within five miles of Whinboro'. The fields were small and the fences many; moreover, they were famed for their double oxers and stiff top-binders; whilst the chief proprietor of the land, a well-to-do yeoman, set his face against fox-hunting, and obstinately refused to take down his wire, even although one or two bad accidents had already occurred.

Tim Burr, well aware of the difficulties in the way of straight-riding, showed discretion to be the better part of valour, by leading the field through a line of opportune gates running parallel with the hounds. But I, in my fool-hardiness, scorned all considerations of danger. In fact, I went out of my way to court it. I had no thought of indulging in that unsportsmanlike proceeding, showing-off, and though I wanted to sell my horse, the idea of doing so was not uppermost in my mind on this particular occasion; I simply felt as if my despair must have some outlet, and so I rode with a reckless disregard of consequences.

Therefore, whilst the whole bulk of the field profited by the friendly gates, and, doubtless, made quite as good, if not better progress than myself, I stuck close to the tail of the hounds, and followed them in a perfectly straight line.

Now there are some countries in which this can be done with impunity; but a man cannot ride very far in the famous Shires, going direct as the crow flies, without paying the penalty of his rashness, and coming to hopeless "grief."

The Siren was fresh and well. She made two or three extraordinary bounds, that elicited considerable applause from the onlookers; but it is ridiculous to expect an animal, however good, to continue making superhuman efforts. At the fourth fence—a great, big, up-standing, stake-bound one—with a stiff rail and ditch

on either side, she came down, catching the far timber a whacker with both hind heels, and pitching on to her nose with more velocity than was pleasant. I lost my seat, but not my bridle; and, in a minute, we were up and away again, not a bit the worse for the fall.

Hounds now took a sudden swing round to the right, which favoured the gate division, but put some distance between me and them. A straggly hedge opposed my further progress. After those I had just jumped, it looked comparatively small, and I raced down at it with every confidence, urging The Siren to her speed, so as not to lose ground.

Suddenly arose that formidable cry, which so oft has struck terror into the fox-hunter's heart—of "Wire, 'war wire!" It broke from at least a dozen voices.

The Siren, as previously stated, was a rusher, and, when once started, was difficult to stop; still, by a strenuous effort, I believe I might have pulled up, had I chosen to attend to the warning. But I did not choose. I cannot explain what spirit of devilry possessed me. I saw that round, well-shaped, white cob amongst the crowd, and the sight maddened me anew, setting my blood aflame.

With an absolutely clear knowledge of what I was riding at, and utterly careless as to the consequences, I raced down on the treacherous wire.

A glorious flying sensation, brief as sweet—a feeling of elation, nipped swiftly in the bud—then a metallic ring; and crash, jerk, roll, concussion—I remembered no more. The tumultuous passions that possessed me were silenced and deadened.

CHAPTER XXX.

KNOCKED OUT OF TIME.

WHEN I recovered consciousness, I found myself lying flat on the ground, surrounded by a small circle of

sympathizing friends, amongst whose anxious faces that of Nellie Fitzgerald stood out prominently.

"What is the matter?" I ejaculated faintly, as yet but hardly comprehending what had taken place, or proving susceptible to impressions from without.

"We don't know yet," said Nell, tearfully, struggling to appear composed. "You have had a terrible fall, and, for the last five minutes, have lain perfectly senseless."

"I feel a bit queer, certainly."

"Hush! don't attempt to speak. I know it is bad for you."

She had dismounted from Father Christmas, and her face was white as a snowdrop in spring-time. Strong emotion was depicted on every feature; and, in a dim, semi-realizing manner, I understood that she was deeply moved by my accident.

I could not bear to lie there and watch the tears starting to Nell's eyes. I made a determined effort to rise, but fell back powerless. A dull, stinging pain prevented me from using my left leg, and gave it a curious numb sensation, such as, in the course of my career, I had never hitherto experienced. The limb felt as if it had been dealt some crushing blow by a sledge-hammer, and had lost all power of motion. I gave a kind of half groan. It escaped from me involuntarily.

"Come, come, my dear fellow," said a sporting surgeon of my acquaintance, who I had frequently met out hunting, and with whom I was on very friendly terms, "don't think of moving just yet. Keep quiet for a bit longer, whilst I try and find out what ails you."

So saying, he knelt down on the grass by my side, and examined the injured member.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, almost immediately, "this leg is broken. I suspected as much, and have already improvised a rough splint wherewith to set it temporarily."

As he spoke, he produced a piece of straight flat

wood torn from a hurdle, and carefully applied it to the limb.

"Who will lend me a pocket-handkerchief?" he enquired, when everything was arranged to his satisfaction.

"I will," answered Nell, readily drawing from the recesses of her pocket a small gossamer affair about six inches square, which had a beautifully embroidered N. F. in one corner. "You are quite welcome to mine."

The doctor laughed and shook his head.

"Do you call that thing a handkerchief?" he said; "because, if you do, I don't. What I want is a good, sensible one, that will go right round the bandage, and make everything fast until we can set the leg properly."

During the operation that followed, comparatively slight as it was, a horrible sort of deadly, sick feeling stole over me. I grew hot and cold by turns, and once or twice was on the eve of losing consciousness again. In fact, I believe I should have done so, had it not been for the prompt administration of brandy, which my kind friends insisted on pouring down my throat.

After what the doctor told me, I did not, of course, make any further effort to move, knowing that such effort would not only be foolish but utterly useless; so I continued to lie flat on my back, in which attitude I experienced less pain than when I sought to sit up.

"I have taken it upon myself to send for a stretcher and a carriage," said Dr. Bruce. "They ought to arrive before long, as there is a village close by, and, when they come, you must tell me where you wish to be taken."

"Where I wish to be taken," I repeated, with a touch of irony, "why, to the inn, of course. Where else should I go?"

"Not a bit of it," interposed Nell, firmly, and with a heightening colour. "Captain Mannington is to go to Cattington Towers. He will at least be properly nursed and looked after there, The idea," with a

burst of indignation that made my heart palpitate, and seemed to me quite charming, "of a poor man with a broken leg being carried to a little country inn, and boxed up all by himself, when his friends are close at hand."

"But, Miss Fitzgerald," I protested, "you have no notion what a nuisance I should prove in the house. I may be laid up for weeks."

"Well, and what if you are? The more reason to have somebody to look after you."

"You are very kind, and I cannot argue the question as well as I ought, but, all the same, I should not think of taking advantage of your hospitality to so formidable an extent."

I spoke the words stiffly, with a lingering remnant of my old pride.

A shadow darkened her countenance. She seemed not only hurt, but disappointed.

"You—you do not understand," she said, in a low voice. "And you are so independent."

"Yes, luckily for me," I answered, *sotto voce*. Then aloud, and with an assumption of cheerfulness—"Why! what on earth would Mr. Austen say, if he knew that you proposed thus unceremoniously introducing a stranger into his house?"

"First and foremost, you are not a stranger, Captain Mannington, and secondly, if you want to know my uncle's opinion, here he is in person to express it for himself."

"Hulloa!" exclaimed that gentleman, joining our group, and speaking in tones full of concern, "What is this I hear? Miles Mannington—bad fall—nearly killed—eh?"

Nell put up her finger to her lips.

"Hush!" she said in a low voice, which, however, I managed to overhear. "His leg is broken for certain, and we do not know what else besides, and would you believe it," she continued, waxing warm, "he actually says he means to be taken back to the hotel, and was almost angry with me when I proposed The Towers."

"Pooh! Nonsense! I never heard of such a thing. He *must* come to Cattington whether he likes it or not. He shan't have any voice in the matter, and if he proves refractory, why, we'll just carry him off by force. You don't object to an invalid, do you, Nell?"

"No, uncle, not at all."

"Very well, then. We'll nurse him between us, and a real bad time he shall have of it if he does not obey orders."

"There!" exclaimed Nell, turning to me with a triumphant look in her dewy eyes. "Are you satisfied now, Mister Unbelief, or are you as full of scruples as ever?"

"My scruples still remain," I answered, gazing at her earnestly. "Even your eloquence and kindness cannot succeed in wholly eradicating them, for I have a presentiment that in yielding I am acting against my better judgment."

She bit her lips and turned away. My reluctance to accept the invitation seemed to mortify her considerably, and yet, after what she had told me, how could I have gone to Cattington Towers except under pressure? I did not see that I could possibly have spoken differently.

"Has any one sent for a carriage?" enquired Mr. Austen of Dr. Bruce.

"Yes," he replied. "I did, knowing that our friend was unable to ride."

"Quite right; and now, Nell," addressing his niece, "would you like to make yourself useful? which you can't do by standing there looking the picture of misery."

"Indeed I should, uncle. A woman always feels so terribly helpless on these occasions. Tell me of what service can I be?"

"Why, you can mount Father Christmas and ride home at his very best pace. Tell them to get a room ready for Captain Mannington, and have everything snug by the time he arrives. Don't you think so, Doctor Bruce?" appealing to the surgeon.

"A most capital idea," said he approvingly.

"You don't mind going, do you, Nell, dear?" asked Mr. Austen.

"*Mind!*" she expostulated in a voice full of reproach. "No, of course not; but, uncle, what have you done with Miss Williams? We cannot well leave her all alone."

"Oh! she's all right. She got tired, so I sent her Jack with Hooper's servant just about five minutes before we found our fox."

"In that case I'll start at once."

And without another word Nell re-mounted her cob, and rode away at a good steady hand-gallop.

After she had gone, my companions managed to lift me into a small cottage standing by the roadside some hundred yards distant, when, seeing that I was in good hands, and that they could not be of much more assistance, they gradually dispersed, leaving me with Mr. Austen and Dr. Bruce, both of whom were kindness itself, and did all in their power to alleviate my sufferings.

After awhile the fly arrived, and as tenderly and carefully as was possible, under the circumstances, I was conveyed to Cattington Towers.

As we passed through Whinboro', I caught a glimpse of The Siren. Until now I had scarcely recovered sufficiently from my fall to enquire after her condition. She was dead lame, and seemed literally cut to ribbons, the blood oozing out from her wounds with every step that she took.

"Poor thing!" I ejaculated; "I see she has not escaped scot-free either."

"They seldom do, when their masters ride so recklessly. Wire tells sad tales," said Doctor Bruce severely. "I hallooed to you several times to stop, but I suppose you did not hear me."

"I did hear," I answered, ashamed to tell a story on such slight provocation, "but I was very foolish and disregarded the warning. The mare is a grand flyer, and I thought we might manage to get over all right."

"Instead of which," put in Mr. Austen, "here you are with a broken leg, your horse probably injured for life, and your sale spoilt. Well, I suppose young men will be young men, but really it seems to me when hounds run that they have very little sense."

I did not make any reply to this remark. To tell the truth, after seeing the poor Siren, I had not a word to say in my own self-defence, and in my innermost consciousness began to think I had behaved like a fool.

Everybody who knows what it is to break a bone out hunting, and to be driven home some eight or ten miles in a jolty fly over a rough, stony road, will understand what my sufferings were during the drive to Cattington Towers; therefore, it is unnecessary to describe them at length. Suffice it that, when finally I was put to bed, I relapsed into a state of unconsciousness, from which my medical attendant experienced considerable difficulty in arousing me.

When I came to myself it was evening, and I found Dr. Bruce still by my bed-side. By degrees I extracted from him that my condition was a very serious one, the extent of my injuries being summed up as follows: Left leg broken above the ankle in two places and narrowly escaped being a comminuted fracture, muscles badly bruised and lacerated, two, if not three, ribs smashed, the others crushed and bent.

As may be imagined, perfect quiet was strictly enjoined. Visitors were not allowed to enter my room, and all conversation was prohibited. Indeed, I did not feel equal to the slightest exertion, for the mere process of breathing caused such exquisite pain that I was only too glad to remain absolutely still.

As soon as Mr. Austen learnt how badly I was hurt, he sent for a professional nurse, who quickly arrived on the scene of action, and for many days I lay in a feverish state, racked by bodily torture, and feeling more dead than alive. Once or twice I was actually delirious, and then in my ravings I had an uneasy consciousness of calling upon Nell, and imploring her to take pity on me. The belief that I had done so, rendered me quite

say in my calmer moments, and I hardly dared face the nurse. Only the sight of her motherly form reposing in an arm-chair, and of her portly bosom heaving gently up and down reassured my fears, and showed that my poor, unfortunate little romance was not so interesting to other people as to myself.

But all sublunary matters either improve or end. There is no such a thing in this world as maintaining the *status quo*; much as it may be talked about in political treaties. Each day brings an almost imperceptible change. So imperceptible that we do not even recognize it as change at the time, and not until we have looked back to a week—a month—a year ago, do we realize that slowly "the old order giveth place to new."

By the end of a fortnight I was pronounced in a fair way to recovery, though the doctor entertained great fears that my leg might be permanently shortened; in other words, that I should limp all my life. A cheerful look-out for a strong young man of seven-and-twenty, bent on following his profession. However great suffering teaches people to be strangely resigned, and to see how little the temporary ills of this life really matter. Anyhow, as long as I lay in bed, I comforted myself with the biblical text, "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." And one afternoon there came a timid tap at my door, which sent my foolish heart jumping into my mouth. I had seen Mr. Austen several times, but never Nell, and to tell the truth I began to wonder at her continued absence, and to speculate as to the cause of it. But now, here she was in person, and with quickening pulses I watched her glide softly into the room.

She had not taken half-a-dozen steps before I was aware that some distinct, though subtle, change had come over the girl. She seemed shy, embarrassed, even if it were possible awkward and self-conscious.

"I have asked after you so often," she said, almost inaudibly, her fair face flaming into colour as she spoke, "but they would not let me see you until

to-day, and now I have orders only to stay a few minutes."

"I thought you never were coming," I said abruptly.

"It was not my fault. I wanted to, but——" and she stopped short. Then, in a lighter tone, added: "Will you eat a few of these?" holding out a plate full of choice hot-house grapes that looked very tempting to my invalid eyes.

"Try me, that's all," I answered laconically.

She seemed pleased at finding her offering appreciated and acceptable, and breaking off a fine ripe cluster, watched me with an air of quiet enjoyment eat the sweet-tasted fruit.

"I feel so greedy, gobbling these up all by myself," I remarked presently, thinking that if Nell had really only a few minutes to stay it was a horrible waste of time spending them on gormandizing, which might be done every bit as well in her absence. "Won't you take a few grapes, just to keep me company?"

"No, thank you. They are meant for you. I stole them out of the hot-house on purpose, at the risk of bringing down our head gardener's wrath on my devoted head."

"No; did you really? How awfully kind of you to have thought of me."

She cast down her eyes.

"I have thought of you very often," she said, in a subdued voice.

"Nell," putting out my hand, "would you like to make me quite happy?"

She clutched it with her little warm fingers, and I could feel them trembling.

"Poor hand!" she murmured; "how white and thin it has grown. Of course, I should like to do all I can to please you, Captain Mannington."

"Tell me then that you have forgiven me for my presumption."

"I," in a constrained voice, "do not know what you mean."

"Oh! yes, you do. You remember the day of my fall."

"Ah!" with a cold shudder, "I shall never forget it."

"Well then, let bygones be bygones. What do you say?"

A shadow as of disappointment stole over her face. It lost its bright look, and assumed a very grave yet somewhat proud expression.

"Most certainly, if you wish it."

"Thanks, very much. I feel far easier in my mind now."

"You need not, I assure you."

"But I do. At any rate, we are friends again, are we not? You don't bear me any malice?"

She did not make an immediate reply, but, to my annoyance, walked to the window, and remained there, staring out at the uninteresting green park and the fields beyond, for what seemed to me an indefinite period. I repeated the demand, though with considerably less assurance, for I was completely puzzled by her manner, and hardly knew whether she intended to repel me or not.

"Yes," she said slowly, still gazing blankly at the wintry landscape, as if it were all-absorbing. "We—are—friends, if—if you wish it."

"I *do* wish it," I said emphatically.

"Very well, then. I have not so many that I can afford to lose my dearest one," she sighed, and tore restlessly at the edge of her pocket-handkerchief.

"And," I continued, turning very red, "I want you to remember one thing."

"What is it, Captain Mannington?"

"You—n—need never be afraid of me again, I promise."

"I don't want you to promise," she said, coldly.

"Yes, you do; and I thought I would just tell you so this once, in order to restore your confidence; but, after to-day, we need never refer to the subject again."

She drooped her head, giving no apparent sign of content, and I confess I was disappointed.

"It must be as you like, of course." Her voice sounded cold and hard.

Certainly women are odd creatures, incomprehensible to a degree, and I defy any man to fathom all the manifold workings of their minds. Here was I, honestly and conscientiously striving to obey Nell's behests to the very letter, and yet, somehow or other, instead of appearing pleased, she seemed growing more and more dissatisfied and estranged from me. I could not make it out at all.

She blushed and trembled by turns; now and again was evidently on the point of making some confession, then suddenly checked herself, and relapsed into frigidity. All I could do, under these circumstances, was to say nothing that could give offence, or be possibly construed into an attempt at love-making.

In this manner I endeavoured, though apparently vainly, to set her at ease, and restore the friendly relations which, in our earlier intimacy, had subsisted between us. Those good old days, however, had evidently vanished.

Nell was restless, fitful—in short, totally unlike herself.

When, after a few minutes of embarrassed conversation, she took her leave, promising to visit me again on the morrow, I lay the whole afternoon, pondering in my own mind what could possibly have happened to produce so strange an alteration in one usually tranquil and self-possessed beyond her years.

I had an uneasy conviction that, in some fashion, I was accountable for her change of manner; and yet, after the apology I had made, I could not help thinking she was treating me a little hardly in keeping up the old feud. If my behaviour had displeased her in the first instance, how could I possibly atone better for the error committed, than by loyally keeping to my promise and refraining from any word, look, or expression of love?

Carefully criticising my own conduct, I failed to see that I was to blame. I had given Nell a distinct assurance as to the future; and, during our short interview, had rigidly adhered to my vow. To do so had

been very hard, but it was harder still to find that, whether I spoke from the natural impulses of my heart, or from the guarded dictates of honour, I was equally in the wrong, and could not, either as friend or lover, please the girl I still loved to distraction.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"UNCERTAIN, COY, AND HARD TO PLEASE."

TIME went by, and the strange constraint that had grown up between Nell and myself seemed rather to increase than diminish. Each day made it more apparent, and yet each day I looked forward with greater eagerness and impatience to her visit, although, invariably, when it came to an end, it left me with a hungry yearning after some little token of affection.

So long as Mr. Austen remained in the room the spell was broken, and matters went smoothly enough. Nell then would laugh and jest in her old and natural manner, sometimes even bringing tears to our eyes by her amusing sallies, but no sooner did her uncle leave than all her vivacity departed. She relapsed into silence; and a stranger, seeing her for the first time, would have imagined that she had not a word to say for herself, and was but a beautiful dummy.

I tried every subject of conversation I could think of, excepting, of course, the prohibited one of love; but none succeeded in interesting her. Such one-sided efforts are peculiarly disheartening, and before long, Nell's taciturnity communicated itself to me, and for whole minutes at a time we would sit without uttering a word or exchanging a remark.

Yet, contradictory as it may appear, I believe we took a pleasure in each other's society, and found solace in being together, even although our satisfaction was prevented from finding expression in speech. At least, so it was with me, and in spite of my companion's re-

serve, she never failed to spend a considerable portion of her time in my room. If she had disliked me wholly, she might have kept away altogether, or, at all events, curtailed her visits. So I reasoned. And then, notwithstanding her silence, she was so sweet, and kind, and considerate. I had only to express a desire for it to be gratified at once, and no invalid could have been more thoroughly spoilt by both his host and hostess.

It seemed to me, too, that Nell was softer and more womanly than in the olden days. Charming she had always been, but also cold. Now the coldness had vanished, and given place to a shy timidity which puzzled yet pleased me. For what could it mean? I often cogitated over that question, but without ever satisfactorily giving it an answer. Had I known more about women and the female character, I might have been less obtuse.

During the long, slow days of my convalescence, Nell did everything in her power to help while away the tedious hours. She constantly read out aloud, whilst my delight was to sit, perfectly unheeding of the narrative, and watch the changeful expressions of her charming face, and listen to the sweet low notes of her melodious voice. I could have sat thus for hours without tiring, drinking in the sunshine of her presence. I knew no higher pleasure, only to a man in my position it proved a dangerously intoxicating one, such as it was madness to indulge in, since the consequences were inevitable.

Occasionally when she turned a page or finished a chapter, I caught Nell's eyes fixed upon me, and once as she gazed at my altered countenance and shrunken form, they became suddenly suffused with tears, which she vainly sought to conceal.

"What is the matter?" I asked wonderingly, like all invalids not realizing the change wrought in my appearance.

She made no reply, but giving a low, hysterical sob, hurried out of the room.

Meanwhile it became evident that there was not the least possibility of my being able to go out to India with my regiment. I therefore wrote to the authorities, and obtaining six months' leave of absence, made up my mind to spend the spring and early summer in England, hoping fully to re-establish my health before undertaking any military duties.

Very, very slowly did I progress towards recovery.

My constitution had received a shock which it could not easily throw off. For the first time in my life I knew what it was to feel ill, and to vary in health from day to day. The knowledge proved far from agreeable.

My physical condition, and the feverish state of excitement in which Nell's daily presence threw me, took effect I fear upon my temper. It became changeable and uncertain, for there were moments when a sudden rush of emotion made me feel as if it were impossible to bear the tension any longer, and at the risk of again offending Nell—probably this time past forgiveness—I *must* speak out my love. I had loyally endeavoured to keep my promise; but day by day the effort grew harder, and I feared that some chance word, some kind look or sympathetic enquiry, might at any minute sweep away all my good resolutions. I felt them daily growing weaker and weaker, and being a proud and, I hope, an honourable man, resolved to flee from temptation. Anyhow, I was but mortal, and could stand Nell's daily proximity no longer without succumbing. Either I must break my promise or go. After much inward cogitation I resolved to do the latter, and directly I was sufficiently recovered to be able to limp round the room on crutches, I wrote to my father saying that he might expect me at Mannington Court on a certain day. Having thus, with a heavy heart, made my plans, I proceeded to communicate them to Nell.

"I want to tell you something," I said, the next time she paid me a visit.

The colour rushed up into her face, making me regret having spoken so abruptly.

"Yes?" she said enquiringly, "what is it?"

"Do not think me very ungrateful or insensible to your kindness, Miss Fitzgerald, but," desperately, "the fact of the matter is, I can't stay here any longer."

A minute before she had been rosy red, now she turned suddenly pale.

"Can't stay here any longer! Why not?" in a perplexed voice full of pain.

"Because I have trespassed on your hospitality too long as it is."

Hitherto she had avoided my gaze, now she turned and looked me straight in the face, as if aware I resorted to subterfuge.

"Why do you say that?" she asked quickly.

"Because I think it."

"No, you don't. You are making an excuse, and not telling your real reason."

I winced under the directness of this attack. She perceived her advantage, and returned to the charge.

"Come," she said, "have you not some other reason for wishing to leave us?"

"Well, yes; perhaps I have."

"There now! I knew it. And will you not tell me?"

I looked at her, and hesitated.

"No," I said, with a violent effort at repression, "not to-day."

"Does that mean never? Forgive my curiosity."

"To-morrow, perhaps, when I leave here, I will make full confession."

"To-morrow!" she echoed, indignantly. "Surely you do not intend going so soon?"

"The sooner the better."

"That is polite, Captain Mannington. But I make no reproaches."

"I apologize for my seeming rudeness. Believe me none was intended."

"It is difficult to believe that, when—when," and her voice trembled, "you are hurting our feelings by running away the very instant you can."

"I do not do so from choice."

"Choice or no choice, Captain Mannington, you are not fit to move. Why, you have not been out of your room, and yet you talk of travelling to-morrow."

"It is true; nevertheless, I must go. Duty and honour both call me hence."

She changed countenance, and appeared disturbed by my words.

"May I ask where you are going?"

"Home, for a time. After that, I neither know nor care. Henceforth," with a sigh, "places will make very little difference to me."

"You do not seem to attach yourself to them, certainly," she returned in a tone of reproach.

"Why should I indulge in so dangerous a practice, I, who am a rover on the face of the earth. No, I can hobble after a fashion, and intend to be independent. Attachments of any sort hinder freedom, and hamper your movements."

I spoke out of the bitterness of my heart, not considering how uncivil was my speech. Nell drew herself up haughtily. If I was proud, so also was she.

"Why don't you say at once that you are tired of us, and directly you feel a little better desire to escape to more congenial society? It would be far more honest."

"I am *not* tired of you," I returned hotly; "you at least ought to know that such an accusation is false, and have no right to make it."

"Me?" in simulated surprise. "Why should I? I don't know anything of the sort."

"In that case, Miss Fitzgerald, you must possess a very convenient memory, far more so than I." Then, with a sudden change of manner, I added impulsively: "Will you not believe me when I say that as long as I live I shall never forget the kindness received at your and Mr. Austen's hands? Words are quite inadequate to express my thanks, for 'I was a stranger and you took me in.'"

"Oh!" exclaimed Nell impatiently, "for goodness' sake don't think it necessary to make us a formal

speech. Neither uncle nor I," with a sarcastic toss of her head, "require any recognition of the small services we may have rendered."

"But I can't go away without acknowledging them, whatever you may say. I should feel a perfect brute if I did."

"You are much more of a brute to leave us. Think," clearing her throat vigorously, "how we shall miss you and how dull we shall be."

"Alas! I must say good-bye, however much it goes against the grain."

"Pshaw! Must is an odious word that ought not to exist in the English vocabulary."

She was so earnest, so persuasive and eloquent, that I had the greatest difficulty in maintaining my self-control. No general, pitted against an overwhelming force, ever fought a harder battle than I did at that moment. It was on the tip of my tongue to blurt out all the truth, but by some miraculous fortitude I managed to drive back the burning words of love that forced themselves to my lips. To-morrow she should know the reason of my departure.

A long pause ensued. Nell was the first to break it. My steady persistence to bid farewell to Cattington Towers had evidently pained her greatly. She took my decision as a personal affront. Would she have accused me of rudeness, ingratitude, and insensibility had she known the truth? I wondered. And yet surely she ought to have been able to guess my motives, and in guessing, honour them. I was going—tearing myself away from everything I loved best on earth—purposely shortening the only halcyon days that might ever fall to my lot again, in order not to break the promise given her. I did what I conceived right, my fault being that I did it with a bad grace. But that I could not help.

"Captain Mannington," she said in a timid, pleading voice. "Will you not stay, if I—if I—ask you to do so?"

The request seemed made with difficulty.

It was positively ungracious to refuse such an appeal as this; nevertheless I felt that there was but one condition on which I could consent to remain at Cattington Towers; and unless I were sure of Nell, I could not bring myself to name it.

"No," I said gently, but firmly, "I am afraid I cannot stay even at your request."

"Is that your final decision?" she said coldly, putting her hand to her collar as if it choked her.

"Yes. It is impossible for me to arrive at any other, after what took place between us."

She threw up her little sleek head like a stag at bay.

"In that case, I apologize for intruding upon your privacy, and for having for one moment sought to change your determination. It was foolish of me in the extreme."

So saying, she swept out of the room, leaving me in a state bordering on distraction. For if Nell and I were to quarrel, the parting would be doubly hard to bear. I could not think what I had done to offend her.

I had tried my best to steer clear of troublous shoals; but sweet, kind darling that she was, it really began to look as if nothing I said or did could please her.

Did she really want me to stay? Was she vexed because I was going? My heart palpitated at the very thought.

At that moment, I would have given five hundred pounds to have possessed the key to that wondrously complex piece of mechanism—a woman's innermost mind. For how else is a poor simple man to fathom its labyrinthian turnings, or comprehend its ever-changing phases?

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE OLD, OLD TALE.

I HAD determined to leave Cattington Towers about midday, sleep that night in town, and then proceed on the morrow to Mannington Court.

Consequently, by eleven o'clock I was up and dressed, feeling a little excited by my unwonted exertions. Mr. Austen had done all in his power to prevent me from putting my purpose into execution; but, rightly or wrongly, having once conceived it my duty to go, I would not allow myself to be persuaded by entreaty. If only I had not in a moment of pride made Nell that rash promise, all might have been well; and many times did I regret having pledged my word to maintain silence, for it put me, so to speak, upon my honour, and rendered flight necessary.

I was standing by the mantel-piece, leaning on my crutches, and sadly musing after the above fashion, when my soldier-servant tapped at the door and handed me a note. At a glance I perceived that it came from Nell, and tore open the envelope. To my disappointment the letter contained scarcely half-a-dozen words.

"I want to speak to you before you go. Will you come into my *boudoir* for a minute?"

That was all it said.

I took a hasty glance round the room. My preparations were well-nigh completed, and in another hour the carriage was ordered to convey me away. So, seeing that my presence was no longer required, and Robinson could finish what little packing remained, I decided to obey Nell's summons without delay, wondering why she, who had so often come to me, should now desire me to go to her.

My thoughtful friends on the day of my accident had put me in an apartment on the ground floor, so that on quitting it I had no steep steps to limp down, for which I felt truly thankful, being still in a very

weak and shaky condition. Robinson helped me carefully along the long corridor, and, glad of his assistance, I did not dismiss him till I arrived at the door of Nell's private sanctum.

For a few seconds I stood outside it, whilst my heart beat with distressing rapidity. Then I summoned up courage, and giving a brisk tap, almost immediately entered into the girl's presence.

She started at seeing me, and my first impression was that she had been crying, but she kept her back towards the light and her face in the shadow, owing to which fact and to the blinds being half drawn I could not make certain if my conjecture were correct. She held out her hand. I took it and clasped it in mine.

"Thank you for coming to see me so soon," she said, in a low voice. "I wanted to see you before we said good-bye in earnest, just to say how sorry I am for having been so rude and cross yesterday. I do believe," with a tremulous smile, "that I was put out at your sudden departure. It came upon me as a surprise."

She spoke in a penitent, self-accusing tone, that touched me to the quick.

"You cannot possibly be more put than out I," I said, with a choky sensation rising in my throat. "In fact, now that it has come to the point, I feel more than half inclined to sit down and cry at parting from my kind friends."

Her face brightened at this remark.

"Do you really? Oh! Captain Mannington, it may vex you to be pressed again, but why not reconsider your determination, and stay even now?"

I could no longer remain severe and inflexible. My heart was full to overflowing, and the moment had come to make explanation.

"Nell," I said reproachfully, "how can I?"

She hung her head, but, with a true woman's persistence, muttered:

"You could if you chose, if—if," in unsteady tones, "if you *cared*."

"I do care. I would give all I possess in this world

to remain for even another week, but, Nell, were I to do so, it would be at the risk of breaking my word to you. I am only flesh and blood. Do you suppose it is an easy thing for a man to abstain from every expression of love, when day after day, week after week, he is constantly in the presence of the girl he worships? Sooner or later Nature must out. I cannot continue to exercise such control. I made a vow never to speak again of my love. God knows how hard I have striven to keep it. I tell you honestly that I am unable to do so any longer. The temptation has grown greater than I can withstand, therefore I have chosen to leave Whinboro'."

"But, Miles—you—you—need not go," she faltered in reply.

"Need not go? Oh, Nell! what do you mean? Why do you add to my torture? Are you blind? Do you not comprehend how things are with me? Listen! Several times you have asked me to remain. Once for all, pray understand that I can only do so upon one condition. It is for you to accept or reject it."

She turned her dark-edged eyes to mine, and in one radiant smile gave me all her fair young face. The soul within, lay naked.

"And what is this terrible condition?" she murmured, in tones of soft content.

A light broke in upon my comprehension: a light that filled my heart with joy, and sent an electric thrill coursing like wild-fire through my veins. The words came easily enough now. A single look had dissipated my fears, and with my fears my shyness.

I took possession of her little trembling fingers, and held them in a strong and loving clasp. Earth seemed turned to Heaven, and Heaven to Love, in its first delicious freshness of sensation.

"Nell," I said, "my condition is this. I will stay and with pleasure; but only as your affianced husband. Darling little woman," as the love-light shone in her clear, truthful eyes, "are my terms too high? You can still bid me go if you wish it."

She turned towards me, her face one sparkle of a smile, which even as her gaze met mine melted into gently-dropping, joyous tears.

"Oh! stay, stay!" she whispered, creeping like a little timid fawn to my side. "It would break my heart to lose you."

In that first, wildly-rapturous moment our lips met, locked together, and our spirits were as one.

Presently I said with a low laugh of triumph:

"Why, Nell, dear, how is this? I thought you could not bear men?"

"Neither could I. I used to hate them; but somehow or other, since I have known you, the hatred gradually turned to toleration, the toleration to downright liking, and," with a delightful sincerity, tempered by maidenly coyness, "the downright liking into desperate love."

"Oh! indeed. And pray when did the last important change take place? This morning?"

"I hardly know, Miles; but long before that. It all seemed to come on gradually. Do you remember the day you proposed to me in the shed?"

"Rather!" pinching her pretty pink ear. "How shamefully you behaved upon that occasion."

"Yes, shamefully, indeed, since I was fighting against my own better instincts, and striving foolishly to suppress them, for I loved you then almost as much as I do now, only I *would* not admit the fact even to myself. You see I was so terribly afraid of making another mistake."

"Poor darling!" I said, smoothing her dark hair. "And you are quite certain now?"

"Yes, Miles; quite. I may have been slow in realizing my feelings, but I am sure of them at last."

"Come, that's satisfactory at any rate. But I say, Nell," banteringly, "you were very near making a precious mess of the whole business."

The bright blood burnt through her fair skin.

"Very nearly," she said, consciously, "but then, how

was I to know that you would turn out such a remarkably virtuous, upright, and straight-laced person."

"Thank you, Nell," I replied, snatching a kiss—as a punishment for her impertinence. "Is that the opinion you hold of your future husband?"

"Well, you know, Miles, that it is quite true. But if it is any consolation to your feelings, I have had a dreadful time of it lately."

"And so have I, little woman."

"When I saw your accident," she continued, "I cannot describe to you what I suffered. I felt as if I were to blame."

"Fiddle-de-dee! That was an idiotic idea!"

"Hush, sir! don't interrupt; and then when you were brought here, and during all your serious illness never complained or grumbled, as other men would have done in your place, but bore your sufferings with the patience of an angel—I—I—well, Miles, I loved you better and better, until at last I hardly knew how to keep from telling you of my love."

"By Jove! I wish you had. That would have been first class."

Nell laughed—a sweet silvery laugh that rang merrily through the room.

"First class, but unmaidenly. It is not the fashion, in England, for young women to propose to young men; but, upon my word, you are such a dear, dense old darling, that I was very nearly driven to do so."

"Never mind, sweet one," I said, straining her to my heart in a close embrace; "everything has come right in the end."

"Yes—but, Miles, confess you were very stupid?"

"Very; but how was I to know how the land lay, particularly when I had to deal with such a reserved and artful little person?"

"Did you never think I liked you, Miles?"

"I was not sure. Sometimes I did, and sometimes I didn't."

"H'm! You might have guessed it without much difficulty."

"How guessed it?"

"Why! by various signs, of course. The thing was so ridiculously patent."

"Unfortunately, I am not learned in the signs of women-kind."

"So it seems. The fact of the matter is, you dear old blind bat, you are far too good and innocent for this wicked world. I could hardly have believed that such a man existed. Anyhow, it shows they are not all bad."

I laughed, and gave her another hug. It is very sweet to be praised by the woman one loves, even although one knows her praises are undeserved.

And Nell laughed too out of sympathy, I suppose. In fact, we were so overpoweringly happy that our joy seemed bubbling over in search of an outlet.

"Dearest," I said reverently and seriously, "I will try my very best to make you a good, and, I hope, an unselfish husband. You poor little women have so much to bear, that it is only right we great strong men should give up some of our egotistical habits for your sakes. Nell, my darling, please God, you shall be happy if it lie in my power to render you so."

"You have no egotistical habits, Miles. You always seem to think of everybody before yourself. There never was any one like you."

So she cooed in my ear, with her soft lips pressed against my cheek.

Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden, never experienced more perfect rapture than we. Our thoughts and natures blended with a delicious harmony.

No wonder Time went by unheeded. Time, the old tyrant, who will not retard his movements for all the human passions and emotions on this earth.

But we dreamt not of him—our dreams were of each other.

We forgot our past troubles and trials—forgot my contemplated journey—forgot everything and everybody but the blissful present. We were young, and, some may say foolish. What then? Do not grudge r

our happiness. Such rare moments are the very essence of life, charged with all that it holds of best and purest.

The wintry sun shed its pale golden glory on the stately trees and smooth lawn outside. Its kindly rays streamed through the diamond-paned windows, and lingered lovingly on Nell's small head as if they would fain offer warm congratulations on our engagement.

A little bird hopped down from the house-top, perched himself on the window-ledge, and looked at us curiously from out his bright, round eyes. Oh! ignorant little bird. What thou sawest was only a repetition of the old, old tale, which has gone on since the world began, and will continue as long as life animates the forms of men and women. The old, old tale! And yet how new, how delicious, as it unfolds its varied chapters to each one of us in turn.

"Please, Capt'in, I have got all the luggage ready in the 'all. Have you any more horders before I start?"

It was Robinson, who, finding his knock disregarded, had unceremoniously introduced his head into the room, thereby seeing a spectacle which immediately caused a broad grin to stretch his naturally large mouth from ear to ear. The interruption recalled us to the realities of life. Nell looked at me, and I at her. The same thought seemed to strike us both.

"Bother the luggage!" I exclaimed decidedly. "Put it all back whence it came, Robinson. I have altered my mind, and shall not leave to-day."

Robinson gave a respectful salute, looked as if he fully comprehended the circumstances which had given rise to this alteration in my plans, and departed to obey instructions.

Nell clapped her hands like a child.

"Oh! Miles," she cried, "I am so glad. You won't talk of running away from us any more now, will you?"

"No, my pet. I intend to stay and be nursed, just as long as you will let me."

"Dear old boy!" she said tenderly; "then that will be for ever."

"Nell," I said after a slight pause, "don't think me a great big coward, but I positively tremble to face Mr. Austen. He will never give his consent to our engagement."

"I am by no means so sure of that, Miles. Very likely uncle may raise a few objections at first, especially about money matters; but, I am positive, when he sees how much in earnest we really are, that he will give in. You do not know how kind and good he is. He would do anything to make me happy."

"And would it make you happy, Nell, to marry me?"

"What a ridiculous question to be sure. Have you actually the audacity to expect an answer?"

"I should like one," I returned demurely.

"Then you sha'n't have it. You ought to know of your own accord, and not require telling."

"But it is so sweet to be told, Nell," stealing a kiss.

"Oh! you tyrant. Do you wish me to go on saying every minute of the day, 'Miles, I love you—I love you to distraction!' If so, I will do your pleasure, only it is a terrible waste of time, and a sad repetition of the same old story."

I caught her to me and pressed her to my heart.

"God bless you, Nell!" I said. "As long as you are true, I have nothing to fear."

She made no reply; but with an infinitely trusting and confiding gesture, stole her soft arm round my neck, and dragging my face down to the level of her own sweet womanly one, rubbed her cheek backwards and forwards against mine like a young kitten.

I knew then and for ever that Nell was staunch as steel.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A PERFECT DARLING.

NELL's prognostications proved correct.

Just in the beginning, when the subject of our engagement was broached, Mr. Austen—as almost in duty bound—raised objections regarding my lack of means. For my own part, I was only too conscious of their validity, since, from a financial point of view, I was but a miserable match for Nell.

"I gather, Captain Mannington," said my host to me, during a serious conversation respecting my present income and future prospects, "that you have very little except your pay to depend upon, and that your father either is not in a position or else is unwilling to make you a fixed allowance sufficient to enable you to maintain a wife."

"I fear he will not do very much," I answered, hanging my head, and feeling terribly weighted by a sense of my own presumption. "I believe his income is a tolerable one, but his expenses are heavy."

"And you wish to marry my niece?" eyeing me from top to toe, with an expression which made me secretly tremble.

"I do, Mr. Austen; although I am not worthy of her in any way, and am sadly conscious of my audacity in even daring to entertain any hope."

"H'm! Audacity, indeed! You may well call it by that name. May I ask, sir," he continued, with a severity I fully believed to be perfectly genuine, "what you intend to keep a wife upon?" And Mr. Austen glared at me as if he thoroughly enjoyed my confusion.

Unfortunately, this was a question of more than common difficulty. Feeling it to be so, I turned very red, and took refuge in silence, as the wisest course under the circumstances. Mr. Austen repeated his demand.

But Nell, bless her dear heart! came to my assistance

at this juncture, and spoke up like the real, true, honest darling she was. As I listened to her speech, I felt how fortunate I might esteem myself in having secured the affections of so brave and good a girl.

"Now, uncle," she interposed briskly, playfully putting her white hand up to his mouth, as if to prevent further embarrassing interrogations issuing therefrom, "you are not to talk to Miles in that stiff, formal way. He is not nearly strong enough yet to be bothered about stupid money matters. They will only make his head ache, and we can settle that between ourselves later on. Anyhow, we have quite decided in our own minds that, with our joint incomes, we have sufficient to live upon." And she looked up at me with such a radiant smile that I could have fallen down on the spot and kissed the hem of her garments. What a brick she was, to be sure.

Mr. Austen took off his spectacles, rubbed them very deliberately with the corner of his pocket-handkerchief, and then exclaimed in accents of well-feigned surprise, "Hoity toity! why, what on earth is the meaning of all this?"

"It means," said Nell, taking my hand in hers, and facing her uncle like a young lioness, "that Miles and I love each other very dearly, and we don't intend to allow ourselves to be parted, or to be made unhappy, by any wretched question of money. I know quite well that he is poor; he told me so long ago, and, what's more, I don't believe he would have been nearly so nice had he had a large income. Rich men are generally nasty. Anyhow, I accepted Miles with my eyes open, and if I don't mind his poverty nobody else need."

The male biped may profess to despise women, but in moments like these he is bound to confess the beauty, tenderness, and courage of her nature. I squeezed Nell's hand in token of gratitude. Her bold defence had made me her captive for life.

Mr. Austen began to show symptoms of relenting, but, before giving in entirely, he launched one last piece of severity.

"Ugh! it strikes me that Master Miles would have done much better to have held his tongue, and not proposed at all."

But Nell, as usual, was ready with an answer.

"That's exactly what he did do," said she, shooting a shy glance at me. "It was *I* who proposed to *him*. Matters would never have come to a point otherwise."

"Nell, Nell! what are you saying?" exclaimed the old gentleman, his notions of chivalry shocked beyond measure by such an idea. "A nice, modest, ladylike girl like you! Why, you would not do such a thing."

"Wouldn't I, though!" returned the mischievous young puss, taking delight in her uncle's incredulity. "The truth is, that when Miles told me he was going to run away, because, as an honourable man, he had made a vow not to speak another word of love to a certain person who shall be nameless, that certain person went down almost on her bended knees to implore him to stay, and had to use all the arts and eloquence of which she was mistress in order to induce him to remain. There!" with a look of triumph in her dark eyes. "What do you say to that?"

"Say?" said Mr. Austen, again producing the pocket-handkerchief, and blowing his nose with curious persistence and frequency. "Say? Why, that you are a couple of foolish young people, who seem to have lost your senses; but since you are evidently bent on getting married, you had better do an act of grace to a poor, solitary old man, and make his house, which will be yours after his death, your home. God bless you, my children." And his voice broke suddenly.

"Mr. Austen," I said, in husky tones, for his emotion communicated itself to me, and I felt deeply moved, "I have not deserved such kindness at your hands. Believe me when I say that it shall be the endeavour of my life to make our darling girl happy."

"I know that, Miles, my boy," he replied, placing his hand affectionately on my shoulder, "and it is for the very reason I have no fear of your not treating her well, or being good to her, that I give my consent to

your union. You are sensible and trustworthy, differ from the modern school of fast, selfish, brainless young men, and, above all, possess a kind heart. As for the money part of the question, why, you might have had a little more with advantage, certainly. Nevertheless, don't let that matter weigh too heavily on your mind. Nell has plenty, and will have more——"

"I wish to goodness she had not got a farthing," I interrupted, hotly.

"A foolish wish, nephew Miles," returned he with a pleasant smile. "For, in that case, how could you live? No, no, put your pride in your pocket, and rest content with the assurance that Nell and I are both aware you love her for herself and herself alone."

"Indeed I do," I exclaimed, with a tender glance at the girl.

"All right, then," said Mr. Austen conclusively. "We need say no more on that point, whilst as for position you have the advantage, and can ultimately give her a very good one."

So matters were arranged, and it was settled we should be married at Midsummer. At Mr. Austen's wish, I sold out of the army, and bid farewell to my comrades in arms, preparatory to beginning my new life as a respectable county squire.

But before that time arrived my father died suddenly, and the title and estates devolving upon me, I had the satisfaction of feeling that, after all, Nell would not be married to an almost absolute pauper, dependent upon her for his daily food.

When Dicky heard of our engagement, he wrote me a very nice letter, in which he offered his warmest congratulations.

"Now that time has softened my wounds," he said, in his somewhat whimsical and high-flown style, "my eyes have been effectually opened, and, looking back to our jolly Whinboro' days, I see quite plainly that she always liked you from the first. I can't think why we were both such duffers as not to have found it out sooner. I can only attribute our blindness to your

modesty and my confidence. Well, old man, I don't grudge you your happiness, for you deserve her, and I don't. Therefore may you live long and be happy. We shall miss you awfully in the Regiment. Little Binning, our youngest subaltern, is quite disconsolate; as for myself, I am in despair. If you hear of my committing any very heinous crime, you must forgive me, and attribute all my eccentricities of conduct to having lost my dear, sober old critic and mentor."

I showed Dicky's letter to Nell, and she insisted on my inviting him to Cattington Towers, so that we should see the last of each other before he sailed for India.

Dicky came, but just at first seemed a little embarrassed at encountering his old love. Her frank manner, however, soon succeeded in putting him completely at ease; so much so, in fact, that he even went the length of confiding to her sympathetic ear the details of a strong flirtation he had recently been carrying on with Miss Williams, who it appeared had been staying with an aunt residing in the neighbourhood of Rugby.

We parted the best of friends.

Since then the years have rolled by, and Nell and I have settled down into quite old married people. Children's sweet high voices ring in the old rooms of Cattington Towers, and from morning till night their little pattering footsteps travel up and down the long polished corridors. Mr. Austen is hale and well, but a veritable slave to the small tyrants, whose powers of persuasion he never can resist.

Nell has hardly changed at all—at least, in my eyes. She may perhaps have grown a trifle stouter and more matronly looking, but her sweet face is as sweet, and bright, and honest, as ever it was. Brighter indeed, for it now wears a look of settled content that was not always present in her girlish days, when often, in the midst of her mirth, a sad expression would throw a subtle shade upon her features.

And my greatest delight is to see and know her happy.

As for myself, I still limp slightly from the effects of my fall, and though I bear the reputation of riding tolerably straight to hounds, my nerve is no longer what it was. I entertain a wholesome dread of wire, and do not consider it necessary—as during my first winter's hunting in the Shires—to go at every break-neck place I come across with or without the slightest provocation.

The Siren bears blemishes which will go down with her to her grave. Stripes and weals which tell of the treacherous metal, but even now she is my best hunter, and in her old age has settled down into a delightfully confidential mount.

Her mistress pets her more than any horse in the stable, and numerous portraits of the gallant grey adorn our smoking and billiard-room walls.

We have excellent accounts of Dicky, who frequently writes to us. He has seen a fair amount of active service, and, from the general tone of his letters, appears greatly to have improved in character, owing to having been forced to give up some of his home comforts and to undergo a few hardships. He has become master of his luxuries instead of their slave. A transformation in every way desirable.

He talks very shortly of exchanging and returning to England; and I know perfectly well that my little wife, in that busy, feminine brain of hers, is plotting how to bring him and Miss Williams together, and make up a match between them.

For, curiously enough, that young lady, in spite of her fortune, though doubtless she has had offers by the score, remains Miss Williams still; and Nell insists upon it, when we talk the matter over in private, that she is waiting for Dicky to come home.

Now, whether Nell's surmises are correct I cannot take it upon myself to say, but, as an old "pal" of Dicky's, I can't possibly wish him better than to enter the holy bonds of matrimony.

Speaking from personal experience, I am in a position honestly to declare, that from the very first moment I set eyes on the "gir' in the brown habit," until the present hour, I have never ceased to consider her the nicest, dearest, and most charming woman in the world.

If Dicky succeeds in finding a wife resembling her in the very slightest degree, then all his friends may clap him on the back and tell him he is an uncommonly lucky fellow, who has indeed drawn a prize.

Only (between ourselves) I don't believe the world can contain quite such another perfect darling as Eleanor Lilian, Lady Mannington. At all events, if any one can produce her let him do so.

THE END.

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